

KIDDIE OF THE CAMP

ROBERT
LEIGHTON



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KIDDIE OF THE CAMP By ROBERT LEIGHTON



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KIDDIE OF THE CAMP

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RATTLESNAKE RANCH



Kiddie exercised his scoutcraft.

Frontispiece.

See page 164.

KIDDIE OF THE CAMP

A STORY OF THE WESTERN PRAIRIES

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Illustrated by E. P. KINSELLA

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TO

SIR ROBERT BADEN-POWELL, Bt.

K.C.B., K.C.V.O.

CHIEF SCOUT

THIS STORY OF SCOUTING ON THE WESTERN PLAINS

IS

RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

KIDDIE OF THE CAMP

CHAPTER I

THE PONY EXPRESS

“ SAY, Rube’s late. Never knew him yet to be behind time, same as now. Wonder what’s keeping him ! ”

The boy whispered these words in a quiet tone of anxiety as he turned over, raised himself on his elbows with his chin in his hands, and looked out across the clearing to the moonlit prairie beyond. The door of the log-cabin stood open within a few feet of where he lay on his couch of buffalo robes, and through the opening he could see far away across the plain to the distant mountains, whose rugged peaks were lost in a blue gossamer haze. The September night was warm and breathless, and seemed still to glow and quiver with the brooding heat of yesterday’s noon. The air was heavy with the resinous odour of the pine trees that stood out black and motionless against the glistening sheen of the river. The soft, tinkling music of running water reached him. Now and again the monotonous chirp of an insect, or the harsh cry of a night-bird broke upon the silence, or the restless movements of the horses in the corral would be heard ; but all else was quiet and oppressively calm.

“ Wonder what’s keeping him ? ” he repeated.

Cautiously he rose to his feet, and stole out among the shadows of the sentinel trees. His moccasins made no slightest sound on the warm, soft carpet of pine needles. He went slowly forward until he came within a wide open space of velvet turf, and stood there in the clear moonlight, listening,

with his watchful eyes bent searchingly eastward along the familiar line of the Great Salt Lake Trail.

He was a strangely picturesque figure, tall for his fifteen or sixteen years. Anyone seeing him might well have mistaken him for an Indian brave, as he stood there with his red flannel shirt open at the neck, his buckskin leggings fringed down the seams with tufts of ribbon and fur, and his long brown hair adorned with a narrow band of coloured beads, from which two long white feathers hung limp behind his ears. His watchful attitude was that of an Indian; but his handsome face was too fair and refined for a Redskin, and the expression of his deep, violet-blue eyes would alone have betrayed the truth that he had British blood in his veins.

"Guess there's something wrong!" he muttered, dissatisfied.

He slowly returned to the cabin. On the threshold he paused, looking within the darkness at the indistinct forms of his six companions. Then he glided silently to his buffalo robe and sat with his face to the open doorway, his hands clasped about his knees.

Presently one of the sleepers stirred. His bed creaked.

"You awake, boss?" the boy questioned, softly, still without turning.

"Wa-al, yes, Kiddie; half-ways, anyhow," came the drowsy answer. "Guess I was woke by a moskeeter a-browsin' on the bridge o' my nose. What're you a-settin' up for? D'ye hear the pony comin' along? Too early, ain't it?"

The watcher near the door shook his head.

"No," he responded.

"Guess you'd better go to sleep," rejoined the station boss. "Rube ain't due yet. What's o'clock by my ticker on the shelf back of Abe, there?"

Kiddie only tightened the grip of his fingers about his knees and glanced at the shadows on the withered grass beyond the verandah steps.

"If you want to know, it's gone half-past two," he answered quietly.

"Eh?" ejaculated the other, in sleepy amazement. "Half-past two? Can't be that, sure! Have a squint at the watch."

"The moon's good enough for me," said Kiddie.

Boss Birkenshaw scrambled to his knees, now genuinely concerned at the lateness of the hour and the non-arrival of the Pony Express.

"Snakes!" he exclaimed. "What's keeping Rube?—Abe! Nat! Chet!—all of you!" he cried aloud. "Wake up! Somethin's happened! D'ye hear?"

In a moment the five other men were sitting up in their beds, wonderingly staring about them in the half darkness of the large room.

Abe Harum, fully dressed as for horseback, slipped to the floor with a metallic clink of spurs, and began slowly to buckle his belt.

"What's the matter, Gideon, old man?" he drawled. "Are you took bad?"

"Dunno, exactly," returned the boss. He drew aside a curtain of buffalo hide that covered an inner doorway. "Mee-Mee, a light!" he demanded. And presently a tall Indian girl, wearing a striped red and yellow blanket, noiselessly glided into the room, carrying a flaming candle, whose flickering light shone upward into her dark, ruddy face and anxiously inquiring eyes.

"Dunno, Abe," the boss yawned; "but I guess somethin' ain't right somewhere. Kiddie there keeps listenin' and listenin' with them wonderful ears of his, and you bet he don't set up doin' that for nothin'. Never knew that boy to make a mistake."

The men all contemplated the sphinx-like figure at the door. Abe Harum pulled out his watch, and held it to the candle-light.

"Reckon he's struck a warm scent this time, anyhow," he nodded gravely. "Half-past two, and Rube not shown up! That's a good two hours behind schedule time. Curious, eh?"

"Sure," assented Gideon. "Looks kinder serious, don't it?"

"Whathev Kiddie got ter say 'bout it?" asked Nat Bixbee from the far corner of the room.

Kiddie had now risen and was standing in the doorway, with his right hand gripping the lintel high above his head. He spoke no word while his companions were trying vaguely to account for the lateness of the Pony Express.

"Bet yer life 'tain't Rube's own fault," suggested Chet Timson, pausing in the work of drawing on his boots. "Guess Rube had to wait for Larry Winthrop at Red Buttes. Larry don't sweat himself any, and Rube ain't the man to mess around on the trail when he's got charge of the mail bags."

"Shouldn't wonder if there wasn't any mails to bring along," surmised Nat Bixbee. "The bags ain't bin over heavy the last week, I've noticed."

"Never knew 'em to be empty, for all that," Abe Harum objected. "And a solitary letter 'uld hev to be passed along the trail to Sacramento the same as a bag-full."

"Mebbe Rube's been took with one of his bad turns," resumed Bixbee. "He fainted like a weak female woman that mornin' when he rid into Puxley's station on the white broncho, you 'member."

"A tenderfoot like you'd do a heap more than faint after a fifty-mile ride with a crowd of yellin' Redskins at your heels and a bullet in your leg," Abe Harum assured him, rebukefully.

"Whew!" breathed the boss, wiping his perspiring forehead with his shirt-sleeve. "There ain't so much as a capful o' fresh air in this yer shanty. Say, let's git outside and wait. Rube won't be long now. Guess one of the ponies way back along the trail hev collapsed, hot weather like this."

"What pony would Rube be ridin' this last stage?" inquired young Tom Lippincott.

"Reckon 'twould be Fiery Cross—the black mustang with the three white stockin's," conjectured Abe, meditatively loading his pipe.

"Like enough," agreed Chet Timson. "The same mount that I rode when we raided the Sioux village, back of Horsehoe Creek, last fall. Rather a testy beast, he is; bucks fearful when he don't feel like hustling along."

"Never knew him to buck any when Rube Carter was astride of him," objected Abe Harum, bending his tall figure to light his pipe at the candle.

"Say, Abe, you was along the trail to Red Buttes yesterday." Gideon Birkenshaw paused by the door, and spoke over his shoulder. "Did yer strike any signs of road-agents spyin' around, or—or Injuns?"

Abe stared at him blankly through a mist of tobacco smoke.

"Wa-al," he answered, striding towards the door, "now you mention it, I caught the flavour of burning wood in the air five mile or so east of Red Pine Cañon. But you don't reckon Rube Carter'd allow hisself to be delayed any by that sort of trash?"

The boss shook his head in doubt, and was silent.

His companions filed out of the cabin after him, and strolled into the clearing, whither Kiddie and Mee-Mee had already preceded them.

"What's that you're saying about Injuns?" Lew Denver eagerly inquired. Lew had had many a brush with the Red-skins, and rather prided himself on his skill as a marksman.

"Wish you chaps would hold your jawing for a spell," interposed Kiddie, moving away from them and bending to the ground in an attentively listening attitude.

They watched him during some minutes of tense apprehension, trusting implicitly in the superior acuteness of his senses, holding themselves so still that not even the creaking of a leather belt disturbed the silence, while he lowered his ear to the grass. When at length he stood upright, he turned to Mee-Mee, and spoke a few words to her in her native Pawnee tongue. The squaw nodded, and glided away in the direction of the corral.

"Reckon Rube's comin'?" conjectured Abe, in a tone of relief. "That's so, Kiddie? D'ye hear him along the trail?" Kiddie looked at him curiously.

"Guess you're right about it being the turn of Fiery Cross," he returned. "That's the pony that's coming."

"My! And you can figger that out already—when he's a good five mile off?" Abe questioned, incredulously.

Kiddie hitched his leggings.

"The night is uncommon quiet," he explained, "and the sound carries far."

"What Kiddie don't know about trail ponies ain't worth knowin', anyhow," observed the boss, swinging round to return to the cabin.

"Reckon I'll just slip across to the corral and have a look at Sunflower 'fore we start," said Abe, who was to take charge of the express on the next stage.

Kiddie raised a detaining finger, and stood listening.

"D'ye hear?" he spoke in a hushed voice. "Gideon? Abe? D'ye hear?"

The two men stood nigh him, each holding in his breath. Gideon shook his head.

"Don't hear nothin', 'cept the old tune of the river," said he.

"Reckon I can just catch a sort of far-away patter," added Abe. "Couldn't swear to its being a pony, though."

The boy looked from one to the other.

"Fiery Cross is runnin' queer," he announced mysteriously.

"Eh?" cried the boss in quick understanding. "D'you figger the saddle's empty?"

Kiddie did not reply, but abruptly left the two men and strode through the belt of trees to the edge of a deep trench that embraced the front of the station like a castle moat. The men slowly returned to the cabin. As they approached the door, Mee-Mee came around the corner of the shanty, leading a saddled pony. She hitched the bridle over the tie-post, and went slowly away. Abe Harum gave the pony a friendly caress as he passed, before entering the cabin to finish his smoke.

In the frequent pauses of their disjointed talk, the men could now hear the dull, regular patter of a horse's hoofs on the dusty trail; very faintly at first, but growing more distinct as the slow minutes went by.

Presently the door was pushed gently back on its hinges, and Kiddie appeared in the opening. He entered silently and laid his hand on Gideon Birkenshaw's shoulder.

"Boss," he said, very calmly and deliberately, "guess we shall all be needin' our guns 'fore sunrise. There's a heap of

horses comin' this way along the trail." He glanced at the six faces in the candle light, and added the ominous word, "Injuns."

"Injuns!" More than one of his companions repeated the dreaded word below his breath. All knew what the warning portended, and none questioned for an instant that the boy's keen senses had told him the truth as surely as if the approaching Redskins were already within the compass of their own sight and hearing. But it was not their habit to betray alarm or precipitate haste. They had successfully resisted Indian raids before, and they were ready now to defend their homestead with their lives. The threatened danger did not appal them; they were as perfectly cool and collected as if Kiddie had merely warned them that a pack of wolves had been discovered prowling in the nearest cañon. The boss took the precaution of extinguishing the candle, lest its light should be seen from afar; Abe Harum calmly knocked the glowing tobacco from his pipe; Nat Bixbee combed out his long hair and flowing moustache before a fragment of looking-glass, while Chet Timson brought food from the larder, and Lew Denver carefully measured out six tots of whisky. Then each went to his own particular rack to take down his rifle and cartridges and arm himself further with revolver and knife.

The boss gave his instructions for the defence as he ate.

"Naturally they'll calculate on stampedin' our hosses," he said. "We've got four-and-thirty in the corral, but I figger they ain't goin' to have any of 'em. Abe, guess you'll be wanted some. You're our best shot, Rube bein' absent, and we can't spare you. If the mail bags ain't been stole from the mustang that's comin' in, I reckon Mee-Mee'd better turn pony-rider for once and take 'em along to Three Crossings. She'll be clear of the fightin' same time. I calculate it's our first duty to see the mails sent on safe, eh?"

"Reckon we've no call to hustle any," drawled Abe. "Kiddie ain't infallible, not by a long chalk."

Gideon grunted deprecatingly.

"Ef you mean by the last observation to insinuate as that there boy's judgment in a matter o' this sort ain't worth the

notice of experienced men," said he, " wal, I jest don't agree with you, Abe, and that's straight. I allow he ain't actually seen any Injuns; I allow nobody but hisself has yet even heard 'em coming along. But for knowin' the secrets of the plains—for scoutin' an' follerin' true on the trail, for seein' an' hearin' an' smellin', an' drawin' correct conclusions from every little sign that anyone else 'ud pass by unnoticed—I notion there ain't a white man in the whole State of Wyoming that can afford to give him points. Kiddie has suspicioned that there's Injuns knockin' around, and I kinder calculate the rifle pit we've been diggin' is goin' to come in useful."

" Right you are, boss," Abe nodded, accepting the rebuke in good part. " Guess Rube's entered the last mile now. Maybe he'll tell us something."

Gideon Birkenshaw was the last to leave the cabin. He closed the door behind him, and followed his companions down to the trail, where Kiddie and the squaw were already waiting with the fresh pony.

The moon's light was now dimmed by a filmy curtain of mist that hung about the higher peaks of the mountains, and the trail was further obscured from view by an intervening rise in the land. But the steady patter of the approaching pony's feet was clearly audible, and even his laboured panting was distinctly heard.

" Reckon your hearin's a marvel, Kiddie," admitted Abe. " Fiery Cross ain't carryin' much of a burden, I notion."

" Snakes ! " cried the boss, as for a brief instant the galloping pony flashed into sight on the ridge of the higher ground. " D'y'e see, boys, the saddle's empty ! Where's Rube ? "

CHAPTER II

THE LITTLE BRONZE CROSS

SNORTING like an engine, white with prairie dust, and flecked with foam, the weary mustang cantered riderless and unguided down the slope, and only faltered when he came within a dozen paces of the anxiously waiting group.

Mee-Mee gasped, and put her hand to her side as she saw the empty saddle. The missing rider was her husband. Where was he? What had happened to him? She clutched at Kiddie's arm. "Rube! Where?" she implored him to tell her. But Kiddie broke away from her, leapt forward, and caught at the loose bridle as the pony drew to a halt, steaming with perspiration, his nostrils dilated and his flanks thumping at every difficult breath.

"Say, Gideon, the pouches are here," the boy cried. "The mail's safe!"

Abe Harum unbuckled the two little satchels and deftly transferred them to the saddle of the waiting Sunflower. He helped the Indian girl to mount, and gave her a few final instructions. Mee-Mee well understood all that was expected of her and was childishly proud of her trust, knowing that Rube would wish her to do this duty in his place. Sitting astride like a man, she seized the bridle, gave the pony a smack with her open palm, and was off like the wind, watched by all but Kiddie, who had remained beside the faithful mustang, searching the animal for signs of what had happened.

"And now, what about Rube Carter?" questioned the boss uneasily, leading the way back to where Fiery Cross had halted. "Suthin's happened, sure."

"Reckon the pony can't enlighten us any," reflected Abe, bending to feel the animal's trembling pasterns.

"He can tell us a heap more than you appear to think, Abe," Kiddie quietly corrected. "He ain't much hurt hisself. But Rube—I reckon Rube's done for."

"Gee!" ejaculated the boss. "Mebbe you've learned a lot in these few minutes. How d'you figger it, Kiddie? Rube's dead, you say? Poor old Rube! That's terrible!"

Kiddie drew in his breath.

"Terrible, and no mistake," he echoed gravely. "He's been shot, back of the head, tryin' to escape from a party of Sioux."

Abe Harum led the steaming pony to the side path.

"Say, I'm mighty curious to know just how you've found out all this so quick, Kiddie," he remarked. "Injuns, I'm ready to allow; but why Sioux? You ain't seen 'em!"

"Guess this arrow I'm carryin' is the handiwork of one of that tribe," Kiddie explained, displaying the weapon. "I found it stickin' deep in the rear of the saddle cloth. So it was fired from behind. The mustang has a bullet wound back of his left ear, and another wound, from which the arrow has fallen, in the thick of the right hind leg. Rube was chased, that's certain."

"But how d'you make out he's dead?" pursued Abe.

"Don't notion he'd ever have left the saddle alive," Kiddie asserted confidently. He had a profound belief in the missing man's sense of duty. "Anyway, he'd a considerable wound back of the head. Look at the pony's hind quarters, his tail, and hocks! They're covered with blood, where Rube was lying back, held by his stirrups for a spell 'fore he dropped off. He was lying forward, Indian fashion, along the pony's back when he was struck, I take it."

"Git!" exclaimed Abe incredulously, yet interested in the boy's deductions. "How d'you arrive at that last cute piece of reasoning?"

Kiddie was now walking at the man's side up the path among the pines, the pony following.

"Guess I found a wisp of his long, red hair, sticky with blood, kinder mixed up in the pony's mane," Kiddie responded. "Rube would have an arm around the mustang's neck, his head lifted, when he was shot. Then, when more

bullets and arrows followed, the pony would rear and buck, throwing him backward. The stirrup strap broke at last, Rube fell off, and Fiery Cross, relieved of the weight, came on home. That's how I figure it. Say, Abe, one of us ought to ride back along the trail to look for him. But there ain't time now. The Sioux'll be right here inside another hour."

Abe did not appear to credit the boy's suspicion that the Indians had the immediate intention of paying a visit to Birkenshaw's station. So little did he credit it that he began to blame himself for having yielded to Gideon's persuasions to permit the squaw for once to carry the mails. It was patent to him that there were Indians in the neighbourhood; but Fiery Cross had run a distance of twenty-five miles, and there was no knowing at what part of this long journey the Sioux had made their attack upon Rube Carter, or how far they had continued the chase of the fugitive pony. They might easily be a full score of miles away, and in any event there was no present danger to fear. There would be time enough to think of defence when the need for action was sure and when Kiddie's childish fancies had been supplemented by the opinions of grown men whose sight and hearing, if not so keen, were as fully to be relied upon as the uncannily acute senses of Gideon Birkenshaw's pampered favourite.

Thus arguing with himself, Abe led the tired and wounded mustang around to the horse shed, and there gave him a careful brush down and a drink before turning him free with the drove of horses enclosed within the stout fences of the corral.

By the time that he had finished, the moon had set behind the deep purple mountains in the south-west, and the land was in gloom. He stood still and looked eastward, but the sky showed as yet no earliest promise of the coming dawn. He felt for his pipe, but only changed it from one pocket to another, as he gave a sudden start of alert attention. A cool, light breeze from the south-west fanned his sunburnt, bearded face, and with it there came to him through the silence, the unmistakable throb of many horses' hoofs, sounding dully upon the plain, hardly more, as it seemed, than a mile away. They were approaching at an easy gallop.

"Gee!" he muttered, "Injuns—sure's a gun! Kiddie's right again. Reckon he's allus right, some ways." He listened once more. The riders were slowing down. It was clear that they had timed themselves to reach Birkenshaw's camp during the dark hour between the setting of the moon and daybreak.

Abe moved away to join his mates. He had left his loaded rifle propped against the bench in the verandah, under the open front window. As he took the weapon in his hand he peered within the living-room. He heard the slow, monotonous ticking of the clock, and the homely chirp of a cricket. There was a pungent smell of cheese in the room, and he was conscious of a faint odour of spirits. Abe smiled grimly to himself, knowing that the flavour of "firewater" would be irresistible to the nostrils of any inquisitive Indian who should stand where he stood now. Gideon Birkenshaw had closed the door from the outside, and it was not locked or barred. Outwardly, indeed, the cabin looked as though its inhabitants might all be within, sleeping calmly, unconscious of any impending danger—as though in their supreme confidence in mankind they had known no need to secure their safety behind bolts and bars.

"Gideon's cute," ruminated Abe. "He don't figger himself being caught in a trap this time. Reckon he was kinder wise to send Rube Carter's squaw along with the express, too."

Very quietly he threaded his way among the dark trees. He could see no sign of his companions; could not hear the slightest sound; but he knew where to find them. They were well hidden in the rifle pit, with their watchful eyes on a level with the grass, commanding an uninterrupted view of the homestead and its outbuildings and the pathway leading past the verandah to the corral beyond.

The boss and Kiddie were together. They had followed Abe's every movement since he had led away the mustang, and now, as he came nearer, Kiddie made a sound like the hissing of a rattlesnake as a signal to him.

Abe stepped into the trench and went down on his knees, facing the cabin and resting his repeating rifle in front of him on the sloping bank of earth.

Gideon presently touched him on the arm and pointed in turn in four various directions.

"Nat, Tom, Chet, Lew," he whispered, indicating the place where each man was at his appointed post. "They won't none of 'em fire 'fore I've given the sign," he said. "Kiddie, here, calculates that's a band of twelve to fourteen Sioux. They're two to one agin us. We've got to watch for 'em crawling up through the long grass."

"Reckon they'll not crawl away agin." Abe spoke in a hushed voice audible only to his two neighbours. He lay at full length, supported on his left elbow, with his hand under the lock of his gun.

They waited and watched, with every sense alert to catch the slightest sound or movement. But for a long, long time all was still and silent, save for the gentle whispering of the breeze in the tree-tops and the ceaseless murmur of the river. Slowly the darkness became less intense; a cold, wan light filtered through the breaking clouds in the east, and against the greyness the distant mountains and the nearer trunks of the pines stood out sharp and black. Through the quiet air the sound as of the twittering of a flock of finches fell upon the keenly listening ears of the patient watchers. It was twice repeated from opposite directions. Kiddie turned round with carefully silent movement, slowly raised himself from his elbows to his hands, and bent his searching gaze to right and left. He had heard the tiniest creak of a dry twig under the cautious pressure of a foot, and now he saw a creeping form glide like a snake into the cover of a clump of sage-grass, while hardly a dozen yards away from him a dark figure stood dimly outlined against the bole of a tree.

"Steady!" Gideon whispered, seeing the boy's hand close upon the weapon at his side. "Not yet—not yet!"

Kiddie slowly sank back into his former position. As he did so he noticed that the polished barrel of Gideon's rifle was raised visibly above the level of the trench. He put forth his hand and gently pressed the weapon to the ground. This deliberate act of caution showed the boss that Kiddie was more cool and discreet than he had supposed.

"Sh-sh!" the boy breathed. He touched Gideon's shoulder, and then pointed.

Barely five paces away from them an Indian had paused on hands and knees, gazing in the direction of the cabin. His feathered head-dress and his bare, greasy shoulders and arms were visible for a moment. He turned and looked backward to his followers, who were creeping stealthily nearer and nearer, and he waved his tomahawk, uttering a low "cluck, cluck," as of a prairie hen calling her brood to her side. Then he stood up to his full majestic height, an imposing figure against the rosy glow that now was flushing the eastern sky. He paused before moving onward; but, brief though his hesitation was, there yet was time for Kiddie's sharp eyes to catch a fleeting glimpse of something which dangled from the Indian's belt—something which told its own gruesome story of what had lately happened along the trail. Even by the uncertain light of the early dawn he saw that the long hair by which the thing was suspended was russet red in colour.

"Rube Carter's scalp," he muttered to himself aghast, and he gripped his rifle, eager to fire.

But already the chief had gone down on his hands and knees; half a dozen of his followers had shown themselves, and it would have been hazardous to fire. One by one they crossed against the light, moving silent as cats. Each was armed with a rifle, tomahawk, and scalping knife, and, like their leader, they were naked to the waist.

Abe Harum rose excitedly to his knees. He would have opened fire, but that the boss restrained him; and it was fortunate that Gideon did so, for hardly had Abe lowered his gun when, from the farther side of him, yet another Redskin passed the end of the trench, and four more were seen emerging from among the pine trees by the pathway leading up from the trail.

Very cautiously all twelve of the savages now crawled in the direction of the verandah, led by their chief, who was easily distinguished by his war-bonnet of white eagle plumes. He waited at the foot of the steps until his braves had gathered about him. Then he crept across the verandah to the open

window and peered inquisitively within, sniffing the lingering odour of "firewater." Seeming to be wholly satisfied that the unsuspecting inmates were sound asleep, he returned very softly to the door, gently pushed it open, and stole into the cabin. One by one the Sioux filed in at his heels, intent upon putting the white men to death and taking their scalps before stampeding the horses from the corral.

This was the supreme moment for which Gideon Birkenshaw had patiently waited. The Indians had fallen into the trap that he had set for them, and they were now ensnared; for by whichever way they should attempt to come out they would be met by a shower of well-aimed bullets.

Leaving his Winchester in the trench, and gripping his two revolvers, Gideon Birkenshaw advanced swiftly up the slope. Abe Harum, similarly armed, was at his side, Kiddie following. Before they reached the near corner of the verandah, Chet Timson and Nat Bixbee joined them from the rear of the shanty, and Lew Denver and Tom Lippincott came running down from the corral, not caring now, though their footsteps should be heard. They knew that the fight was to be short and hot, and they were eager to participate before all was over.

One of the alarmed Sioux showed himself on the verandah, raising his gun. Instantly the boss pulled his trigger, and the Redskin fell headlong down the steps. There was a wild yell within the cabin, and a precipitate attempt to escape into the open. Abe and Gideon took quick aim and fired a couple of shots each, and two of the Indians flung up their arms and stumbled over their fallen companion. Those behind, crowding at the doorway, drew back, and at once began to retaliate from their ambush, but with careless, random aim, and their shots for a time were harmless, while Abe in particular fired with steady persistency whenever a Redskin ventured to reveal himself at window or door. Presently there was a rifle-shot from the window, and Chet Timson swayed and sank to the ground with a bullet in his head. As the puff of smoke cleared, Kiddie saw the feathered head-dress of the Sioux chief, who was again levelling his rifle, and he ran swiftly to the farther corner of the verandah, climbed over the

low rail, and watched the window, with weapon ready. With a side glance he saw that Lew Denver had taken Chet's place. Lew had fired three ineffectual shots when he, too, fell. Kiddie crept closer to the window, hoping to pick off the savage whose gun had already done such woeful mischief ; but the chief had drawn back into safety, and two or three of his braves were preparing to climb out by the casement. One stood on the settle ready to leap. Kiddie fired at him as he emerged, and he dropped with a heavy thud to the verandah floor. A second followed, and he also received a fatal shot. None other ventured to escape by this way.

In the meantime Nat Bixbee, greatly daring, had posted himself at the foot of the steps, commanding the door and firing into the cabin shot after shot at the moving crowd of Redskins within ; the boss and Abe stood ready in the rear to pick off any who should successfully run the gauntlet of Nat's fire, while Tom Lippincott took his post at the back window, lest any should contrive to break the bars and wriggle through.

The sudden cessation of Nat's firing seemed to tell the Indians that he had emptied both of his revolvers, and they made a combined rush outward by the door, with uplifted tomahawks and clubs. But Nat had only paused to pick up Lew Denver's still loaded weapon, with which he promptly met the wild onrush of yelling savages. Five of the Sioux assailed him, and one of their number got to his rear, dealing him a fearful, cleaving blow on the back of the head, just as a well-directed shot from Abe Harum's gun struck the savage under the weapon arm. One of the Indians then turned and fled along the path towards the corral, pursued by Gideon. But already Tom Lippincott had run out to intercept the fugitive, who sought cover among the trees. Tom watched him as he flitted from trunk to trunk, waiting for a chance to bring him down with a shot from his Winchester. Three shots he fired, but all missed. The Redskin gained the open, and made off at hot speed in the direction of the hollow where the Sioux horses had been left.

"After him, Tom !" cried the boss from behind. But Tom needed no urging. At the edge of the belt of trees he

halted, and took steady aim at the running target, fired twice, and saw the Redskin stagger and fall, then rise and continue his zigzag flight, painfully limping, and again fall. Tom dropped his empty rifle, and, whipping out his revolver, ran on to assure himself that the savage should go no farther.

When Gideon returned to the front of the cabin, it was to see Abe Harum standing with his bare right arm hanging helpless and bleeding, and his left hand raised, firing his last shot into the naked chest of the one remaining Indian.

"Reckon that's the lot, Gid." Abe nodded as the Redskin fell. He glanced aside at Gideon. "I see you ain't hurt any," he added. "But I reckon poor Nat's done for; so's Lew and Chet. Where's Tom?"

"Guess Tom's all right." Gideon looked around at the visible signs of the grim conflict. "Don't see their chief among 'em," he said wonderingly. "And where's Kiddie?"

Abe swept the blood from his arm with the flat of his hand, and loosened his neckcloth, which he held out to Gideon to use as a temporary bandage.

"Reckon Kiddie's coveting that yer war-bonnet," he responded. "I seen him follerin' behind when the chief slipped out of the cabin and made off."

Gideon adjusted the bandage so that, while it covered the ugly wound, it might also stay the flow of blood.

"You say Kiddie's on the trail of the chief?" he questioned, finishing his work with a carefully tied knot. "Say, which way d'you notion he's gone?"

Abe shrugged his shoulders and turned in the direction of the well. He was feeling weak from loss of blood.

"I wasn't idle enough to watch," he said faintly. "You might locate him somewhere around the corral."

While Abe went for a much-needed drink, Gideon sought for his fallen companions, hoping that they were not yet beyond help. Tom Lippincott, he believed, was unhurt. He approached Lew Denver and Chet Timson. They were lying together. He looked down upon them, stooped, and touched them. Then slowly his hand went up to his hat, and he bared his head.

"Chet and Lew was allus the same as brothers," he mut-

tered solemnly. "It's kind of companionable their going on the Long Trail together."

Nat Bixbee next claimed his regard. But he had no need to look a second time at Nat. He reverently turned the man over on his back to hide the gruesome wound that had caused his death, and went sadly away.

Gideon then glanced round at the silent, motionless forms of the Indians. He and his mates had been too well skilled in the use of firearms to leave room for fear that any one of the savages would show signs of life. But there was still the chief, whose fate was in doubt. Had he escaped? And where was Kiddie?

"That yer boy ain't the one to run foolish risks for nothin'!" he meditated. Abe had hinted that Kiddie might be found near the corral, and that was, indeed, the most likely place; for the chief, flying for his life, would naturally want a horse, and it was there alone that he could hope to find one.

Gideon hastened along the footpath, nervously searching to right and left. He had not gone many yards, however, when he perceived his favourite. Kiddie was seated upon the gnarled trunk of a felled pine tree, with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. The rosy light of the rising sun was upon him, and at his side there lay the feathered war-bonnet of the Sioux chief.

The boy did not look up as Gideon's long shadow moved across the sunlit grass in front of him.

"Say, what're you doin' settin' here so lonesome?" Gideon questioned abruptly.

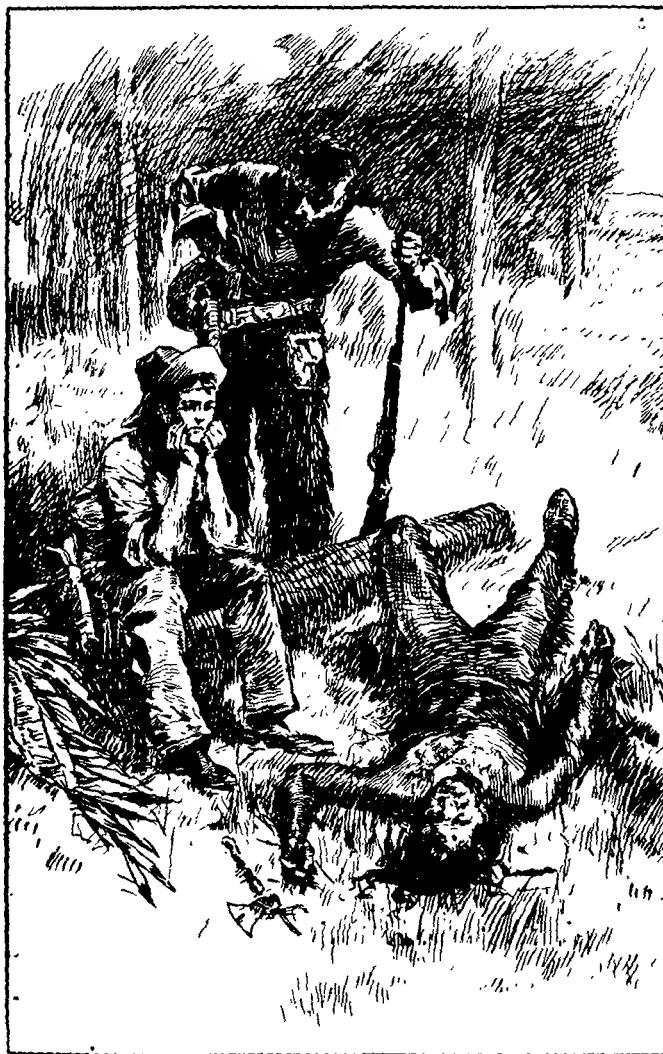
"Thinking," Kiddie answered. His eyes were fixed upon the face of the Indian lying motionless at his feet. "There's no call for more shooting, is there?"

"No," the boss nodded. "There's none of 'em left. Guess 'twas you as finished this one?"

"The bullet came out of my gun, and 'twas me that pulled the trigger," said Kiddie, drawing a deep breath.

Gideon Birkenshaw smiled grimly.

"You ain't regrettin' what you've done, surely?" he asked. "'Tain't every boy can say he's killed an Indian chief in fair battle. What are you thinking about so serious?"



"I was just wondering where I'd seen this individual before."

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Kiddie's gaze was still concentrated upon the rigid form of the warrior.

"I was just wondering," he ruminated gravely, "wondering where I'd seen this individual before. His face is kind of familiar, same as a face seen long ago in a dream."

Kiddie now rose slowly to his feet. As he did so, something fell with a metallic chink from his hand—something that glistened in the sunlight as it dropped.

"Say, what's that?" Gideon stooped and picked the thing up from amid the sage-grass, and held it in the palm of his hand. It was a gold chain, lengthened by a string of coloured beads, and from the chain there was suspended a small Maltese cross of bronze. Gideon examined it curiously.

"There's reading on it," Kiddie pointed out. "You can see the two words, 'For valour.'"

"Don't think I ever heard of such a name as Valour," Gideon reflected. "Valour? Valour means bravery, don't it? Thought so. Guess the thing's a kind of war token. 'Tain't American, though, and 'tain't Indian. I suspicion it's English. They deal in such fixings over there. Most of 'em's gold or silver, I've heard. This one's only bronze. It can't be of much account. I see there's a lion on it standin' on top of a crown. Yes, I notion it's just English. Where did you get it, Kiddie?"

Kiddie motioned his head towards the fallen warrior.

"The chief was wearing it round his neck," he said.

Birkenshaw strode to the Indian's side and stared down into the livid face that was seamed with old wounds and grotesquely smeared with paint. He bent lower and pushed aside a lock of the long black hair.

"Gee!" he exclaimed excitedly. "It's Eye-of-the-Moon, the war chief of the Sioux! You've killed the greatest Injun this side of the Rockies." He drew back. "Seen him before, you say? Yes, guess you have, so've I—years and years ago, when you was no higher'n my belt. Don't wonder at you remembering him. You've got cause." Gideon looked once again at the bronze medal, and then glanced upwards at Kiddie. "This same token that he's took such care of was

around your own neck, not his, when he brought you along," he said enigmatically.

"Brought me along?" Kiddie repeated, with wonder.
"How do you mean?"

The boss nodded as he stood facing the boy.

"You didn't calculate you'd lived at this here station ever since you was born, did you?" he asked. "'Tain't so. I allow you're known all along the trail as Birkenshaw's Kiddie, but, though, in a way, you belong to me, you ain't my son. I'd be proud if you was."

Kiddie stared at him in perplexed silence for some moments. Then he glanced in contempt at Eye-of-the-Moon, and back again at Gideon.

"Don't tell me that I am the son of this Indian!" he implored. "I'm not a Redskin, am I?"

"Well," returned Gideon. "It's plain you've got Redskin blood in you, boy. But I'll go bail your father was a white man. Eye-of-the-Moon here could have enlightened you some, if you hadn't silenced him. He knew, I reckon. 'Twas him that took you from your people—stole you from them, as he'd steal a horse or a gun. 'Twas him that sold you to me a matter of twelve years ago, when I was a lonesome trapper, wanting a companion, away back on the North Platte. I bought you from him, Kiddie; bought you in exchange for a plug of tobacco and a handful of glass beads—the best bargain I ever made in my life. He wouldn't part with the bronze cross, though. He'd a mind to wear it himself, and it seems he's taken good care of it. Queer that it should come back to you again after all these years, eh?"

Kiddie regarded the medal with a new interest. Neither he nor Gideon Birkenshaw had ever heard of the honoured Victoria Cross, and neither could have foreseen to what strange events the finding of this modest decoration on the body of a dead Indian was destined to lead.

CHAPTER III

HOW KIDDIE CAME TO BIRKENSHAW'S

"QUEER that it should come back to you after all these years," repeated Gideon, looking over Kiddie's shoulder at the Victoria Cross, which the boy was examining with intent curiosity. "You may bet Eye-of-the-Moon made out that it was a powerful medicine—a charm that would protect him from his enemies. He must have worn it these fourteen years and more. What are you trying to do with it?"

Kiddie had rested the medal on his knee, and was rubbing it with a wet finger.

"I believe there's a name on it," he announced, rubbing more vigorously. "But it's all clogged up with hardened blood." He held it to the light. "I can read it now," he cried. "It looks like an English name—'Captain Reginald Fritton.' I suppose that's the name of the chap it belonged to—some soldier who got it as a reward for valour, eh?"

"Likely," assented Gideon Birkenshaw. "I reckon he earned it the same as Eye-of-the-Moon earned his feathers. Dare say this Fritton was a big warrior and horse thief in his own tribe, and took heaps of scalps, eh?"

"He was an officer, anyhow," commented Kiddie, looping the chain round his neck and thrusting the little cross securely into the breast of his red flannel shirt. "I'd give a lot to know all about him." He rose to his feet, glancing inquiringly at the boss. "Of course, it ain't possible he could be my father, is it?" he questioned.

"Can't say as you look anyways like the son of an English gentleman," Gideon returned, with a grim smile. "You've got too much of the Redskin about you for that. No, I shouldn't calculate he was any relation of yours." He moved back, and regarded the Indian's splendid head-dress, which

Kiddie had removed and placed carefully aside, so that its white eagle feathers should not be sullied with blood. "This here war-bonnet of his might be worth keeping as a trophy," he presently resumed. "You did well to follow on his track. If he'd escaped to his village, we should all of us have been rubbed out before nightfall as sure as mud. What made you go after him as you did, all alone, running the risk of his turning on you?"

Kiddie bent over the prostrate chief, and picked up something which he held aloft between his fingers.

"It was seeing this hanging from his belt," he responded, gloomily. Gideon Birkenshaw drew back from the gruesome sight.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Rube Carter's scalp!" There was no mistaking Rube's beautiful long red hair. "Say, you guessed right about Rube being dead when you saw the pony galloping home without him. Where is he, I wonder? Somebody'd better go back along the trail and look for what's left of him, eh? Come, let us get to the cabin and see how Abe is, and if Tom Lippincott is safe. We've got a stiff day's work in front of us, putting all them dead Injuns out of sight, and giving a decent burying to Chet, and Lew, and Nat. They've all fired their last shots. A good job none of 'em was married, eh? Rube has left his squaw behind, it's true; but Mee-Mee's only a Pawnee. She'll soon get used to being a widow."

"Rube was a Britisher, wasn't he?" Kiddie inquired, as he walked by Gideon's side among the quiet trees.

"Reckon that's so," Gideon nodded, "though he never owned to it. He spoke like one, certainly—sharp and direct, clipping his words. And he got a London newspaper sent to him at times. Yes, I allow Rube was a Britisher."

"I dare say that was why I was so fond of him," Kiddie reflected. "I wonder if he knew the man whose name is on the medal?"

"Tain't likely," Gideon decided. "But you can't ask him now, any more than you can ask Eye-of-the-Moon."

Kiddie sighed. "Wish I could meet an Englishman!" he murmured longingly.

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"Do you hanker after being English yourself, then?" inquired the boss. "You ain't that, anyway, and you may safely bet that you were born out west, here. All the same, I allow it looks kind of likely your father was a Britisher. I've thought so from the first. When I got you from Eye-of-the-Moon, you spoke clean English, same as poor old Rube, and your clothes—what you had of 'em—was made of English stuff. The buttons on your pants, too, were marked with the name of a London tailor, which goes for something. Then you'd been well nurtured, and you ate like a child that had been brought up among gentlefolks, and said prayers like a Christian. But, for all that, there was a lot of the Redskin about you, Kiddie; a lot, there was. You could talk the Pawnee lingo as if you was one of 'em; you'd the Injun's sharp hearing and keen sight, and his eye for coloured beads and gaudy feathers and things. I've only wondered why you've never taken to painting your face and wearing the blanket. As for horses—well, I could never teach you anything you didn't know about horses. Yes, you was always a bit of a mixture, neither one thing nor the other. So I make out that, if your father was a Britisher, then your mother—well, by the look of you, your mother must certainly have been a squaw."

"Tisn't anything to be proud of, having a father who married an Indian squaw," Kiddie regretted.

"Better be born half white than wholly red, though," observed Gideon. "Your mother might have married one of her own tribe, and then you'd have been a full-blown Injun."

"I'd have been born wholly white if my father had only married a woman of his own race," Kiddie deplored. He reflected for some moments, then he asked: "Didn't Eye-of-the Moon tell you where he had got me from?"

Gideon shook his head.

"Maybe he did," he answered. "He told me heaps of things, but, as I couldn't understand a word he said, the information wasn't of much account. All I know is that Eye-of-the-Moon came from back east one night of storm, riding on a broken-kneed piebald mustang, with you a-

sleeping dog tired in front of him among a heap of scalps that he had hanging from his belt. White men's scalps they were, by the look of 'em, two or three days old. There was a fresh bullet wound in his cheek that was still bleeding, and he was half dead with hunger and fatigue. I was by myself there, in a dug-out on the North Platte River, where I'd been trapping beaver, and was that lonesome I was real glad to get sight of a human being, though it was only a painted Injun. Naturally, I gave him food and shelter."

"Naturally," commented Kiddie.

"He slept like a log that night," Gideon continued, "but was off again slick, time of sunrise, scenting somebody on his trail. 'Fore he mounted, he discovered his horse was some lame, and he figured that a plug of tobacco and a few glass beads and other portable fixings that he fancied would make less of a burden for the nag than a useless child that wasn't his own, and, after a bit of bargainin', he rode off, leavin' you behind, without even sayin' good-bye to you."

"He left me in good hands, anyway," Kiddie interposed.

"You'd been sound asleep all that night," Gideon went on, "and in the dim candle-light I'd no notion you was anythin' but a Redskin papoose that he wasn't sorry to be rid of. But when Eye-of-the-Moon had gone, and I was washin' your pretty face—pretty as a maid's it was—you began to chatter to me in English, and then, bit by bit, I learned what had happened—how Eye-of-the-Moon and his braves had made a raid on the ranch where you'd been brought up, and how he'd carried you off. You didn't know how many might have been killed in the fight, or whether the Injuns or your friends had got the worst of it. You wasn't able even to tell me your father's name or the name of the ranch. Your mother, you said, was called Pine Leaf, and your own name was Little Cayuse—Little Horse, that is; but I called you Kiddie, and the name has stuck to you, see? Everyone along the trail knows you as Birkenshaw's Kiddie."

He broke off as they came round the corner of the cabin and into the clearing, where the recent fight had been most severe. Tom Lippincott sat on the steps of the verandah nursing a wounded foot. Abe Harum stood near him with a

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dipper of water in his hand, from which he was offering Tom a drink.

"Say, Tom," cried the boss, "did you finish off that chap you was a-runnin' after just now?"

Tom dolefully shook his head.

"Reckon he got away with a couple of bullets in him," he answered, with his nose in the dipper. And then he explained that the fugitive Redskin had allured him within bow-shot of a young Sioux, who had been left in the hollow to mind the Indians' horses. This Sioux had opened fire, and one of his arrows had struck Tom on the foot as he ran. Tom had abandoned the chase, only pausing to see the two Redskins mount and ride away, driving the spare horses in advance of them.

"Wonder they never waited to see whether their chief was dead or alive," ruminated Birkenshaw.

"It's easy seeing he ain't alive," remarked Abe Harum, with a glance at Eye-of-the-Moon's war-bonnet, which Kiddie carried like a cloak over his arm.

"That's so," Gideon proudly declared. "Kiddie here was lucky enough to draw a bead on him."

"Pity Kiddie didn't do the same by the skunk that's escaped," said Abe.

"Yes," agreed the boss, "I guess those two have made off in a beeline to their village somewhere back of Devil's Creek, and you may bet the whole tribe of 'em'll be here before long, counting on taking our scalps along with our horses. What d'you say, Abe? Do you figure we'd best make tracks out of this, and abandon the station while there's time? There's only four of us left, you see, counting Kiddie; and you're hurt, so's Tom."

The situation was certainly perilous, for the disappointed Sioux, who had lost their great war chief and a dozen of their braves without gaining anything in return, were sure to make speedy retaliation.

"We're in a pretty tight corner, however you look at it," Gideon decided.

"Unless we could get help from along the trail," Abe Harum added. "The post rider from back west ain't due

here for twenty hours yet, though ; and who else is there to pass along the alarm ? ”

He glanced at Kiddie as if expecting him to volunteer to be the required messenger.

“ Do you reckon we could get some of the boys from Three Crossings, then ? ” questioned the boss.

“ Why, yes,” drawled Abe. “ It’s a good eight miles nearer than Red Pine, anyhow. I was thinkin’ Kiddie might ride along, and let ‘em know just what’s happened.”

“ We’ve got no call to worry about sending to Three Crossings,” Kiddie demurred. “ Hasn’t Mee-Mee gone there ? Mee-Mee knew as well as I did that there were Redskins knocking around, and that Rube Carter had fallen foul of them. She heard their horses coming along too, and guessed we should need help pretty soon.”

Gideon Birkenshaw shook his head gravely.

“ There’s no dependin’ on an ignorant squaw to say the right thing,” he reflected, “ and Three Crossings ain’t the best place to look for help, anyway. Dick Rushton’s lot away at Red Pine would be here in four hours or so, if we could only let ‘em know what a fix we’re in.”

Kiddie plucked idly at one of the plumes in Eye-of-the-Moon’s war-bonnet.

“ Reckon I could bring them along inside of three hours, riding on Rosebud,” he announced. “ If you’re anyways willing, boss, I’ll start right now, soon as I’ve had a wash and a bite of something. Do you agree ? ”

“ Sure,” nodded Birkenshaw, “ though there’s considerable danger in it.”

Kiddie did not ignore the fact that he was undertaking a mission of danger ; he did not forget that his destination was in the direction in which the two fugitive Indians had escaped with their horses, and that there was risk of his being waylaid by these revengeful savages. But Rosebud, the mustang which he intended to ride, was noted all along the trail for her swiftness and sureness of foot, and a brace of loaded revolvers would afford additional protection.

Leaving Kiddie at his breakfast, Gideon went out to the corral, carrying bridle and saddle cloth. He wished to save

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time by having the pony waiting at the tie-post when Kiddie should be ready to mount.

"Yes," he said to himself, as he strode through the dewy grass, "'tain't every boy that can boast he has killed an Injun chief. It's a thing to be real proud of. All the same it'll bring the rest of the tribe down on us, sure as sure, and Kiddie's scalp won't be worth a red cent if we don't get help. Why in thunder didn't those two Redskins wait to see what had happened to their chief, I wonder? Maybe they calculated that he couldn't come to any harm, wearing that medal; but I shouldn't be surprised if they were to crawl back, soon as they find he ain't following them. Snakes! What's that?"

Gideon came to an abrupt halt as an Indian's arrow flew across his path, plunged into the trunk of a neighbouring tree, and stuck there quivering with the impact. He glanced quickly from side to side, searching for signs. Then he ran forward to the compound, flung open the stout gates, and quickly caught the required pony. When he had buckled the bridle and saddle, he led the willing animal out, securely fastened the gate behind him, and again searched for signs of the presence of the Redskins.

"Don't think I'd better mention that arrow to Kiddie," he decided. "He'd make out that he oughtn't to leave us. But he's safest out of the way, and there's no knowin' but he may bring help before it's too late."

He guided the pony with a loose rein. He still feared with every step that he might come upon an ambushed enemy, and he held his loaded revolver ready in case of need. But he saw no slightest sign, and heard no disturbing sound. When, however, he came to the spot where a little while earlier he had found Kiddie sitting staring into the face of the fallen chief, he started back in surprise.

The body of Eye-of-the-Moon was no longer there.

CHAPTER IV

ONE TREE GULCH

“SCENERY? Oh, yes, the scenery’s simply ripping. No one can pretend it isn’t. Look at the mountains over there! They’re better than any we saw in Switzerland, if you ask me. I thought heaps of that cañon we passed through yesterday, and this One Tree Gulch that we’re now in isn’t half bad. But I bar the open prairie, pater. It’s too dreary for words. I hope there isn’t much more of it to cross before we get to that chap Carter’s place. It seems a fearfully long fag to have come all the way from England over here, just to have a jaw with a Johnnie who may not be the right man after all.”

The canopy of the lumbering prairie waggon was open at the side to admit the morning sunlight, and Geoffrey Severn and his father, who had just had their bivouac breakfast, were leaning on folded arms over one of the jolting hind wheels, gazing back through the gulch towards the distant foot-hills. Geoff didn’t look at all like an English public school boy. His face was tanned to a ruddy brown by the winds of the Atlantic and the hot sun of the plains. He wore a wide-brimmed, soft felt hat, and a suit of khaki-coloured tweed, with a brown leather belt and bandolier, and in his belt there was a natty little revolver.

This last he wore as a personal adornment supposed to be appropriate in a country reputed to be inhabited by prowling Indians, thievish desperadoes, and grizzly bears, rather than as a weapon of offence or protection. Geoff never really expected that he would have occasion to use it in self-defence. Indeed, if there was one thing more than another which had disappointed him in the Great Salt Lake Trail, along which

he and his father were now travelling for the first time, it was the absence of all traces alike of Indians, desperadoes, grizzly bears, and buffaloes.

"What would make the prairie look equal to its reputation," he said now, "would be a herd of bison being surrounded by a band of yelling Redskins. But we haven't so much as seen a solitary bison yet, nor a genuine Redskin neither, excepting that cove with the blue blanket on him in the saloon at Bitter Creek; and he was more than half tipsy, and didn't look a bit like my idea of a noble savage."

"I thought him extremely picturesque and dignified, nevertheless," remarked Mr. Severn, dropping his finished cigar in front of a horseman who was riding alongside the waggon a little to the rear. "And I should say there wouldn't be much sham about him if you met him on the war-path. Of course, he wasn't rigged out in his war paint, and didn't carry a tomahawk, or wear a feathered head-dress; but I thought his face remarkably fine, in spite of the scars and old wounds, and his figure was positively majestic. Didn't you think so?"

The horseman who, with three companion plainsmen, was acting as guide and escort to the travellers in the waggon, drew nearer abreast. He seemed to be listening with curious interest to the two strange English voices.

"He might look majestic on horseback," Geoff admitted, "but he waddled like an overfed duck when he walked out of the saloon."

The rider alongside dropped his bridle on his horse's neck, slowly removed his buckskin gloves, and took a briar pipe from one of his pockets. Mr. Severn, seeing his intention, produced his silver-mounted cigar case, and held it forth over the waggon rail.

"Try one of these, Buck," he invited. He had heard the man addressed by this name, but Buckskin Jack was the title by which he was known on the plains.

Buck nodded gratefully, leaned over from his saddle, and took one of the cigars. Geoff Severn noticed that his hand was unexpectedly clean, and that the finger-nails were neatly trimmed. He also observed that, instead of biting or breaking

off the end of the cigar, Buck took his gleaming bowie knife from his belt, and daintily cut a tiny wedge of the tobacco from the point. As he lighted the cigar, the light from the match, which he cleverly shielded from the breeze, shone into his black-bearded face beneath the shadowing brim of his sombrero. It was a grim, almost haggard face, very thin, with prominent cheek-bones and piercing blue eyes. He extinguished the flame between his finger and thumb before throwing the dead match aside; then he smiled to Geoff Severn, revealing a row of teeth that looked strangely white amid the blackness of his moustache and beard.

"Guess you're kind of wonderin' why I was so careful to put out that light, eh?" he said, in the drawling voice of the far west. "If you'd seen as many prairie fires as I have, you'd just know."

He began to puff at his cigar with evident enjoyment of its aroma. Geoff considered him an exceedingly picturesque figure in his bullwhacker's garment of flapping leather chaps, flannel shirt, loosely knotted kerchief, and enormous sombrero hat, beneath which his long black hair fell in a shiny cascade to the level of his broad shoulders. He carried his Winchester rifle slung across his back, and a pair of Colt's revolvers in front of him within quick reach of his hands. He rode his beautiful white horse with the ease of one who lived his life in the saddle.

"I say, Buck, aren't there any Indians knocking around in these parts?" Geoff inquired. "Or have you desperado fellows cleared them all out? I dare say you've potted a good many in your time with that Winchester of yours—if it *is* a Winchester?"

The rider took his cigar from his lips, and held it near his nose to inhale its fragrance. Then, again, he glanced sideways at the boy in the waggon.

"Say, you ain't hankerin' to meet any of that kind of scum, are you?" he questioned. "Indians are best seen in picture books. Close acquaintance with them isn't to be coveted if you reckon on gettin' home with a whole skin." He paused, then added, "Your home's not in the States, I calculate?"

"We've come over from England," Geoff volunteered.

"H'm," nodded Buck. "A pretty long distance that, to come to see Injuns. By the look of things, I don't think you'll be disappointed. One of my pardners picked up a broken arrow back where we had breakfast, and you might see the prints of moccasined feet on the trail that we're now travelling if you cared to look for 'em. If you want a plainer sign—well, you'll find it in the hoof marks of a troop of Indian horse that galloped along here not many hours ago. Shouldn't wonder if they belonged to the same tribe as the Redskin you say you saw in the saloon at Bitter Creek. Seems to me I've heard before of that same Injun with the scarred face and the blue blanket. If he's the one I have in mind, he's a boss war chief of the Sioux nation. Eye-of-the-Moon he calls himself—one of the cunningest horse thievcs this side the Rockies. Wish I'd been in that saloon!"

"Why? What would you have done?" Geoff wondered. "Have you a grudge against him? Would you have shot him at sight?"

Buck did not answer. His eyes were upon the winding trail some distance in advance of the waggon, where a pair of crows had just alighted. Suddenly he snatched at his bridle, put spurs to his horse, and cantered off, followed presently by two of his comrades, who had caught sight of the same sinister object that had attracted him. Mr. Severn and Geoff went forward to the front of the waggon, and stood beside the driver. Looking out over the backs of the team, they saw Buck ride up to something that lay at the side of the trail. The two crows rose into the air, sailing away on indolent wings.

"Guess that's a dead man they've found lyin' there," grimly remarked the driver, and he cracked his long whip. The mules broke into a quicker trot, and the lumbering waggon swayed violently from side to side like a ship in a storm.

Buck leapt to the ground almost before his steed had halted. He bent over with his hands on his knees, his cigar between his fingers, staring down into the upturned face of the dead man who lay there. He remained in this attitude until the waggon came up.

"D'ye know him, Buck ?" shouted the driver.

Buck bared his head then.

"Sure," he nodded gravely. "Indians have done this. They've taken the poor chap's scalp, see ! It's one of the Pony Express riders, and a pal of mine. I'd a talk with him only last night at Red Buttes, and saw him start with the mail. He can't have been dead more than a dozen hours, I'd say."

"Reckon this is his six-shooter," added one of the guides, picking up a revolver from the grass. "Cartridges all spent. He's had a tough job, defendin' them mail bags. I see there's an arrow stickin' in his shoulder, and a shot wound back of his head."

Buck drew the arrow forth, and calmly scrutinised its feathered end.

"Sioux," he decided. "With Eye-of-the-Moon's fancy mark on it, too."

He knelt at the dead man's side, searching for his watch, his knife, or any other personal possessions that the Indians might have left. But there was nothing—nothing but a crumpled and blood-stained letter in his breast pocket. Buck drew out this letter, opened it, and casually glanced at the writing. Something which he read there seemed to excite his keenest concern. He looked around, almost guiltily, to see if he was watched, then he quickly folded up the paper again, and thrust it into his pouch.

Mr. Severn, Geoff, the driver, and others, alighted from the waggon, and gathered round him in an inquisitive group. He looked across at Mr. Severn.

"A countryman of yours, sir," he said, indicating the dead man. "English."

"Eh ?" Mr. Severn pressed nearer, with a new interest in the victim of Indian savagery. "English, you say ? Dear me ! You knew him, then ? What was his name ? Do you know ?"

"I don't fancy he was known by his true name out here," Buck answered evasively. "Perhaps he had reasons for hidin' it."

He started suddenly to his feet, and stood in an attentively

listening attitude as he looked eagerly over the heads of the smaller men about him. His interest in the dead man had suddenly subsided.

"Listen, boys!" he cried, with an ominous note of alarm in his voice. "Do you hear? What's that sound? Horses? Indians? Say, you'd best get into the waggon, all of you, quick!" he recommended.

They hesitated, listening with bated breath. What they heard was the beating of many hoofs, as of horses galloping furiously beyond a bend in the gulch; and even as they listened this sound was broken by a wild human yell that sent a chill through the veins of those who heard it.

Very deliberately Buck again mounted his white horse, signing to his mates, Joe Burrelle and Wal Hoskin, to follow his example. Mr. Severn, Geoff, and the two men, who were acting as their servants, climbed into the waggon. The driver took up his reins, and was about to urge on his team when Buck turned to him.

"Stay where you are, Bill," he ordered, "and look to your passengers," and to Mr. Severn he politely added, "Can't say if there's any real danger, sir; but I calculate the yell you just heard was Redskins, and maybe you'd be wise to see that your loaded guns are handy."

In advance of the waggon there was a wide expanse of sage-grass, and beyond this the sides of the gulch closed into a narrow defile. It was from this defile that the alarming sounds came, growing more and more distinct, mingled now with the intermittent report of firearms and the repeated cries of savages. Buckskin Jack held his Winchester across his knees, taking up a position on guard in front of the waggon.

Suddenly a horseman appeared, galloping furiously out of the gloomy mouth of the defile, followed immediately by a band of savages in hot pursuit. He rode lying flat along his horse's back to afford less of a mark to his pursuers, gripping the bridle in his left hand, while, with his right, he held a revolver prepared to fire at the first Indian who should come within range of his difficult aim. He was obviously watching his chance as he lay looking backward over his shoulder. Even as he emerged into the open the foremost Redskin was

barely more than a score of yards behind him, firing at him with uncertain aim from a repeating rifle.

Buckskin Jack took in the situation at a glance. The hard-pressed fugitive, whoever he might be, pale-face or Redskin, friend or foe, was riding for his life, and must be helped. The fact that his mustang was ridden with a bridle, and not a rope halter, showed that he was not an Indian, as did also his wide hat and red shirt. One of the Redskins who wore a warrior's head-dress was close at his heels, and seemed to be gaining upon him.

Without a moment's hesitation Buck raised his Winchester, took quick aim, and fired. Geoff Severn, excitedly watching the chase, saw the Indian fling up his hands, drop his gun, sway in his seat for a second, and then fall to the ground. His companions rode over him where he lay, and his fall incited them to a more noisy pursuit. They urged their horses forward with wild screeches, while, with bow and shot-gun, they sought to bring down their escaping prey. One raced forward waving his tomahawk, visibly gaining upon the fugitive. Then a cry of alarm from their midst betrayed that the waggon had been seen. Some drew their halters, and swerved round.

For an instant the fugitive raised himself and glanced hurriedly across the open, perhaps to assure himself that his pony was keeping to the beaten trail, but, more probably, to ascertain, if he might, whence came the rifle-shot that had so opportunely relieved him of his nearest pursuer.

As the sunlight shone into his white face the watchers in the waggon saw his features clearly. They were the features of Kiddie of Birkenshaw's.

"Reckon he's one of the Pony Express men," cried the driver. "That's Birkenshaw's Rosebud he's ridin'. He's seen us."

"Ah-h!"

This exclamation of dismay came from Geoff Severn, as he saw Rosebud stagger with an arrow piercing the back of her head. Excited though he was at seeing a band of real Indians engaged in the chase of a human quarry—and his excitement was mingled with a good deal of nervous trepidation on

account of his own personal peril—Geoff gave his sympathy instinctively and wholly to the rider who had such odds against him, and he witnessed the chase with an English schoolboy's enthusiasm, his pulses throbbing fast with dreadful apprehension.

"Quick, oh, quick!" he cried, as Rosebud, regaining her balance, plunged on again desperately, with her rider still apparently unhurt. Geoff perceived that that rider was a youth hardly older than himself, and he yearned, in spite of danger, to help him. But already Buckskin Jack had put spurs to his horse, and was charging swiftly forward. As he rode he raised his gun; but before he fired Rosebud staggered again, dropped on her knees, and rolled heavily on her side, throwing her rider a yard or two away, where he alighted on his hands and knees.

The Indian with the tomahawk adroitly avoided the fallen horse, and circled round, raising his weapon to strike.

"Oh, he's done for!" gasped Geoff excitedly. "He's done for now! He hasn't a ghost of a chance!"

CHAPTER V

MISSING

BUT Kiddie of Birkenshaw's, creeping on all fours, flung himself behind the barrier of his expiring horse. Quick as thought he levelled his revolver and fired, and the threatening tomahawk fell from splintered fingers. The six remaining Indians now galloped towards him, yelling loudly, assailing him with arrow and bullet. But only his alert eyes and his weapon hand were above the level of the protecting horse behind which he knelt, and as each Redskin approached he fired shot after shot in quick succession from his two revolvers. Seven shots in all he fired, as Geoff Severn counted ; but now his weapons were both empty, and the clamorous Indians were surrounding him in a tightening circle, eager to secure his scalp. Surely he could not hope to escape !

“ Ping ! Ping ! ” Two shots from Buckskin Jack's Winchester disturbed the savages at their work. One of them, having dismounted, collapsed in the act of drawing his scalping knife, and another reeled like a top as his club was raised to bury its ugly spike in Kiddie's exposed head. Buck himself then dashed into the throng, firing to right and left. Burrelle and Hoskin were behind him, but ere they reached him he was at Kiddie's side.

“ Jump up here, if you can ! ” he called. “ You're hurt, I see,” he added coolly, noticing a trickle of blood down Kiddie's cheek, and a dark, wet patch on the front of his red shirt.

“ Guess it's only a scratch,” returned Kiddie, putting away his useless weapons and rising to his feet.

Buck leaned over and caught at his outstretched hand, helping him to mount. An arrow glanced by him, but he

only seized his bridle, and, at a touch, his obedient horse raced back with its double burden towards the waggon.

"Say, stranger, have you left your mail bags behind?" Buck turned to ask, when they were beyond immediate danger.

"I wasn't carrying any," Kiddie answered, looking backward over his shoulder. "Do you see?" he exclaimed. "There's another lot of the Redskins just coming out of the gulch. Shouldn't wonder at their making an attack on your outfit."

This second detachment of the Sioux had also been seen from the waggon, and Geoff Severn reflected, with alarm, that there would probably be occasion, after all, for him to make serious use of his revolver. Very thankful were both he and his father to see their three escorts riding back in safety. Geoff had excitedly watched every movement that Buck had made in rescuing the helpless horseman, and had already exalted him in his mind to the dignity of a hero.

Buck now rode up alongside the waggon. He and Kiddie dismounted. They looked at each other as strangers.

"You came along just at the right moment," said Kiddie. "I guess you saved my scalp for me, anyway. I'm obliged to you."

The frontiersman was regarding him intently, noticing that he was a half-breed.

"Where are you from?" he questioned. "I don't seem to know you."

"I'm from Gid Birkenshaw's camp, back west," Kiddie responded, glancing across the open and observing with satisfaction that the Indians were no longer advancing, but had gathered in a body, and were evidently engaged in a council of war. "Some of these same Sioux reckoned to stampede our horses early this morning. They were beaten off, but Boss Birkenshaw has a notion they mean to pay us another visit, and I was riding along to Red Pine to fetch help when their scouts spied me, three or four miles back from here, and gave chase. That pony I was riding went like the wind. I'm real sorry she came to grief," he added ruefully.

"It's risky, a youngster like you riding alone," remarked Buck. "How old are you?"

"Don't know exactly," Kiddie answered. "Gideon Birkenshaw reckons I'm sixteen, anyhow." His eyes were upon the frontiersman's black-bearded face. "Ain't you the man they call Buckskin Jack?" he inquired. "I've often heard he's the best shot on the Salt Lake Trail, and the way you knocked over the warrior that was after me made me think you can't be anyone else."

Buck smiled grimly.

"Well, he would have finished you, sure, if I hadn't taken careful aim," he responded. "Even as it is, you're wounded and looking precious white about the gills. You'd better get into the waggon, hadn't you? Now that you've lost your mount, there's no good in your thinking of going on to Red Pine. And we shall need your help here if these Sioux come along."

"I don't figure that they mean to," said Kiddie, who had been watching every movement of the Indians. "By the look of them now, I'd say they're more likely to hang back until you and your outfit have moved away from here, and offered them a better chance of dropping on you in the narrow of the gulch."

"In that case," decided the frontiersman, "there will be time for me to doctor your wounds for you."

Kiddie was turning towards the waggon when he caught sight of the body of Rube Carter lying at the side of the trail. He went slowly up to it, and stood over it for some moments in silence, staring fixedly at the familiar features that were now so horribly distorted.

"Guess you knew him, eh?" Buckskin Jack spoke very softly. "Poor Rube!" he breathed. "He was a real good sort, wasn't he?"

"Good as a brother to me," sighed Kiddie. Then, after a pause, he said sadly, turning moist eyes upon the black-bearded man at his side, "You found him here, I reckon?"

Buck nodded. "Yes, just here. How do you know that we found him? How do you know that we were not here when the Indians took his scalp?"

"Why," Kiddie answered quietly, "I just noticed that your waggon mules are sweating some. You've not been here many minutes, but Rube has been dead hours. It's hours since his pony came home alone with the mail bags. And one of the Indians, when they raided Birkenshaw's this morning, had Rube's scalp dangling from his belt."

Buck closed his fingers in a tight grip of indignation.

"I'd put a bullet into that same Indian if I could only come across him," he muttered vindictively.

"It was Eye-of-the-Moon," Kiddie told him, "but I don't calculate that you'll have any opportunity of putting a bullet into him now."

"Why not?"

"Well," returned Kiddie, "he ain't shaping to go on the war-path any more. That's why."

Buck darted a surprised glance at the boy.

"Do you mean he's dead?" he asked sharply.

Kiddie nodded. "That's so. He's gone right away to the happy hunting grounds. I saw him lying dead along at Birkenshaw's this morning."

"That's a piece of news I'm not sorry to hear," said Buck. "And who was it that did the business for him, anyway? Was it Lew Denver? Lew's a sure shot, I've heard. Or was it old man Birkenshaw himself?"

Kiddie was moving away.

"'Twasn't Lew," he answered, "nor yet Gideon. I kind of think I did it myself."

"You?" exclaimed Buck. "A shaver like you killed Eye-of-the-Moon? Say, you deserve a grant from the United States Government. I envy you. It's years and years that I've been wanting to do what you've done, but the skunk has always given me the slip."

Kiddie then turned towards the waggon, preparing to mount by the wheel.

Geoffrey Severn, leaning over the side, stretched forth a helping hand, which Kiddie took.

"You did awfully well," was Geoff's schoolboy greeting of him when they stood facing each other. It was as though he were commanding a comrade for having completed a

successful innings in a cricket match. "Awfully well," he repeated.

Kiddie listened with singular interest to the sharp, clear English voice. It was so different from the drawling voice of the plains. He did not himself speak for some moments, but stared wonderingly at the array of firearms placed ready for use on the top of a barricade of trunks and boxes. The painted names and the labels on the baggage attracted his observant eye. On two of the larger boxes he read the inscription, "E. A. Severn, passenger to New York," and most of the luggage bore a name which he took to be the name of a steamship. From them he turned to regard the occupants of the great prairie waggon. The usual travellers along the trail were either Mormons on their way to or from Salt Lake City, or else prospectors or emigrants intending to settle in the far west; but the clean-shaven, very respectable-looking gentleman whom he saw here, and the fair-haired, well-dressed youth who was his companion, in no way resembled the customary type of travellers across the plains. Kiddie's curiosity concerning them was very keen. It was abundantly clear to him that they were not Americans. He concluded that they must be Britishers, and his surmise was supported by the circumstance that he had noticed flying at the head of the waggon a flag which he took to be British, although he had never before seen a Union Jack flag, excepting in pictures.

"They're English," he decided, "come out west on a hunting expedition, and I guess they've engaged Buckskin Jack to show them where to locate the game."

"I hope you are not badly hurt, young man," remarked Mr. Severn, climbing towards him over a large cabin trunk. "You had a close shave just now—a very close shave, indeed. Lucky for you that help was so near in the person of our friend Buck."

"Are these Indian Johnnies going to attack us, do you think?" Geoff inquired anxiously, watching a drop of blood trickle down Kiddie's left cheek.

Kiddie shook his head.

"No," he answered. "It was only my pony that they

notioned to get hold of. She was just about the best mustang that ever chewed prairie grass. Now that she's dead, they'll quit."

"Sit down here," invited Mr. Severn, indicating the top of the trunk. "I'm a bit of a doctor in my way. Let's have a look at your injuries."

Buckskin Jack entered the waggon as Mr. Severn was sponging an ugly scar on Kiddie's crown. He stood near, critically watching the process.

"I have some sticking-plaster in my dressing-case," said Mr. Severn, moving away to get it.

Buck bent over, parting the wet hair from the wound with the point of his finger.

"Tain't more'n skin deep," he said. "I calculate the wound on your chest is likely to be more serious. Open your shirt."

He himself loosened the buttons of Kiddie's red flannel shirt, and a bullet dropped at his feet and rolled among the luggage. There was a long furrow in the hard muscles of Kiddie's chest, from which the dark blood oozed. In the midst of it there hung a small bronze cross, suspended by a gold chain that was lengthened by a string of coloured beads.

Buck drew a sharp breath of astonishment at sight of the honourable decoration in so strange a place.

"Gee!" he muttered, agitatedly. "The V.C.—here!" and aloud, he asked, "Where in thunder did you get this?"

Kiddie supposed that the man was referring to the wound that he had disclosed, and he answered unconcernedly:

"I reckon it was just a shot that one of them drew on me from ambush."

"So?" Buck quickly recovered from his astonishment, but his fingers, nevertheless, were nervously playing with the medal. Very adroitly and unnoticed by the wearer, he removed both the cross and the chain, and, still unsuspected, thrust them deep into his pocket.

He stood back as Mr. Severn returned with the sticking-plaster for Kiddie's wounds. He made his way among the baggage to the fore part of the waggon, and looked out through the dazzling sunlight to the spot where the dead

Rosebud lay half hidden in the long grass. There was no sign of the Indians now.

"Reckon we may as well be moving again, Bill," he said to the driver, who was meditatively loading his pipe. He planted a foot upon the seat, and, raising himself, caught hold of a corner of the Union Jack that swayed lazily in the soft breeze above the driver's head. He gathered the bunting in his fingers, drawing it to him hand over hand.

"Here, I say, what are you up to?" cried Geoff Severn, in consternation, as he seized the tall frontiersman by the leg. "That's our British flag, and I'll thank you not to touch it. Kindly leave it where it is!"

But already Buck had pulled it down from its insecure fastening. He bundled it under his arm, and, passing in front of Bill, leapt to the ground.

Geoff followed him, angrily protesting.

"Do you know that that's a Union Jack, and that you're insulting it, taking it down that way, you impudent Yankee?" he cried indignantly. "What are you going to do with it? I'll let you know it's as good as your stars and stripes any day!"

Buck stood still then, and looked very calmly into Geoff's flashing eyes, as he allowed the flag to unfold itself.

"If you imagine for a moment that I intend any sort of insult to a flag that I—that I honour and respect, you're considerably mistaken, my cocky young patriot," he said. He spoke seriously, and Geoff could not help detecting that his voice had in it less of the Western drawl than usual. "If you'll just step along with me to the far side of the waggon, you'll see what I'm going to do with it. No harm, I assure you."

Still wondering and unsatisfied, Geoff followed him round by the rear of the waggon. Buck then approached the body of Rube Carter, and reverently covered it with the flag.

"There," he said, drawing back. "I guess that's kind of appropriate, seeing he's a born Englishman who has died doing his duty. Do you object any?"

The indignation in Geoff's face had disappeared.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "That's rather nice of you,

and I'm sorry I interfered. You're not such a very dreadful desperado after all, if you can do a thing like this. What do you propose to do with him—not leave him here for the crows, I hope?"

Buck shook his head.

"If you and your father don't object to his company in the waggon," he answered, "I propose to carry him right on to the ranch where he lived, where he'll get a decent burial. Hoskin and Burrelle will see to him for the present. I intend to ride a bit in advance, to make sure that none of these skulking Indians are lying in wait for us. I calculate you've no ambition to meet them at close quarters, eh?"

"Indeed, no," returned Geoff. "I've seen enough of them."

"Yes," resumed Buck, with a smile. "The chase you saw just now was heaps more exciting than any scrum you've seen on the playing fields at Eton, wasn't it?"

Geoff looked at the man sharply.

"Eton?" he repeated in astonishment. "How do you know I've been at Eton? And how do you happen to know the meaning of a scrum?"

The frontiersman's face reddened under its tan. He looked momentarily confused.

"Oh well," he returned hesitatingly, "you simply advertise the fact. There's the badge you have on your hat, you see: *Floreat Etona*."

Geoff admitted that the inference was correct.

"But how about your using the word 'scrum'?" he questioned.

"Well," explained Buck, "I'd a pal out here who'd been a boss football player at that school, and used to talk endlessly about house-masters, and fagging, and Sunday questions, and exams, and such things. He was great on football and cricket. So you needn't be surprised, anyhow, if I know the meaning of a scrum."

"I see," nodded Geoff. "And is this chap—this pal of yours—still in America?"

Buck motioned his head towards the thing that lay under the Union Jack.

"That's him," he answered drily. "That's him, under the flag."

Geoff Severn was dumb for some instants. He turned his wondering eyes upon the human shape beneath the bunting.

"An Etonian?" he murmured. "An Etonian—scalped by Indians?" Then he glanced inquiringly at Buckskin Jack. "Do you mind telling me his name?" he asked.

Buck shrugged his great shoulders. His right hand was in his breeches pocket, crumpling the blood-stained letter that he had taken from the dead expressman.

"I don't figure you'd know it," he drawled, "and I can't just swear that he gave his true name out here; but the name he'd a habit of using when he signed a bill was Reuben J. Carter."

Geoff Severn started as if he had been struck.

"Carter?" he repeated. "Reuben Carter? Good glory! Why, that's the very man that we've come all the way from England to see!" And, without another word, he turned abruptly to the waggon and clambered up to impart the news to Mr. Severn.

Buckskin Jack strode to his white horse that he had left nibbling the dry grass some distance away. His foot was in the stirrup, and he was about to leap to the saddle when Kiddie of Birkenshaw's ran up to him and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Eh? You here?" Buck regarded him coldly. "I thought you were still in the waggon. Your wounds can't be very serious if they've been fixed up so quickly."

"They didn't need much fixing," Kiddie told him.

"Well?" pursued Buck, "d'you want me? Got something to say to me 'fore I ride off along the gulch?"

"Yes," returned Kiddie, "I wanted to ask if you happened to see something hung by a chain around my neck a while ago, when you opened my shirt to look at the bullet wound on my chest. Guess I've lost it, and I've a notion you know where it is. It's a sort of token made of bronze, the shape of a cross."

Buck stared at him curiously. Kiddie's long brown hair was lank and wet after the sponging of his wound. His

violet-blue eyes were dark under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, and his face was dirty with mingled perspiration and prairie dust. He looked particularly Indian at that moment.

"I've a notion you took it," he ventured, accusingly.

"That's so," Buck nodded, thrust his hand into his pocket, and slowly drew out the Victoria Cross with its chain of gold, and coloured beads, which he gathered into his palm and held out to Kiddie.

But Kiddie demurred to take it back.

"Maybe you covet it?" he suggested. "It's not of any value to me, only that I thought the gold chain might be worth a dollar or two."

"I'll give you a five-dollar bill for the lot," returned Buck. He turned the medal over in his hand, examining it closely. "I can't say you've shown it great respect, keeping it so filthy dirty," he ruminated. "A soaking in antiseptic lotion wouldn't do it any sort of harm. Say, where did you happen to pick it up, now? Where did you find it? And how long have you owned it?"

His questions were asked with seeming carelessness, but, nevertheless, he was breathing deeply as he waited for Kiddie's answer.

"I've owned it only since this morning," was the response. "I got it off the body of Eye-of-the-Moon."

"Gee!" exclaimed Buck. "That's the most amazing thing I've heard for a long while—an Indian wearing a Victoria Cross!"

"Gideon Birkenshaw said it's likely the chief reckoned it would protect him from his enemies," explained Kiddie.

"Yet your bullet killed him this morning, you tell me," smiled Buck, turning to mount his horse.

When he was seated he took a roll of American bank notes from a pouch in his belt.

"Say, what's your name?" he inquired, handing one of the notes towards Kiddie and looking down into the boy's blue eyes, in which the sunlight now shone.

"Kiddie of Birkenshaw's," was the answer. "That's the name I'm known by along the trail."

"Guess I've heard it before," nodded Buck, gripping his bridle. "You're the boy that saved Rube Carter from the bear, ain't you?"

He rode off across the level stretch of scrub, and then followed in the direction taken by the Indians. Entering the narrow defile, where he was beyond sight of the people of the waggon, he drew rein and dismounted, leading his horse to the side of a stream, where he allowed the animal to drink. For a while he listened. The Redskins were now far away, and he could but faintly hear the beating of their horses' hoofs. He judged that they had no intention of lying in ambush to attack the waggon. It was more likely that they had decided at once to return with their dead and wounded to their village somewhere beyond the intervening hills.

"I should say they'd had about enough of fighting if they are the same lot that were with Eye-of-the-Moon at Birkenshaw's this morning," he reflected. "And if he's really gone to the happy hunting grounds his braves will be too busy lamenting his death to care about taking any more scalps."

His bridle slipped from his fingers. He took out the little bronze cross, and again examined it closely.

"It has suffered a lot since I saw it last," he said to himself. "Strange that it should turn up again after all these years! How on earth did it come into the possession of Eye-of-the-Moon, I wonder?" He turned it in his palm. "Someone's been trying to clean it lately—that half-caste boy who gave it to me just now, I expect, wanting to decipher the name. Luckily, I spotted it before Mr. Severn could get hold of it. That chap Severn is up to something, coming all the way from England to see Rube Carter. What's his little game?"

Slipping the medal into his pocket, Buck drew out the blood stained letter which he had taken from Rube's dead body. He opened it carefully.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, as for the first time he read the address at the top of the sheet, "Lincoln's Inn, eh? Shouldn't have expected Rube to have any dealings with the law! Woa, Snowdrop! Be steady!"

What he read was this :

“ Lincoln’s Inn Fields,
“ London, W.C.

“ To Mr. Reuben J. Carter,
“ Birkenshaw’s Camp,
“ Sweetwater River,
“ Wyoming, U.S.A.

“ DEAR SIR,

“ *Re Captain Reginald Fritton.*

“ We are in receipt of your communication of 6th ultimo, in which you respond to our advertisement in the *Times* newspaper, and we are indebted to your courtesy in furnishing us with information concerning the above-named Captain Reginald Fritton. That information is of so important a nature that our Mr. Ernest Severn has decided to cross the Atlantic with the purpose of having a personal interview with you, and of pursuing any further inquiries which may lead to the discovery of the missing officer.

“ As you will have gathered from our advertisement, Reginald Fritton left England some seventeen years ago, and has not since been heard of. For reasons which it is not at present necessary for us to rehearse, we are particularly anxious either to ascertain his present whereabouts or to have legal proof of his death. We shall, therefore, be greatly indebted to you for any assistance which you can afford us in our inquiries, and, as an earnest of our good faith, we enclose herewith a draft on our New York agents for the sum of 500 dollars, payable at sight.

“ We are, dear sir,

“ Yours faithfully,

“ Severn, Bulstrode, and Severn,
“ Solicitors.”

“ So that’s how the land lies, is it ? ” Buck muttered, with a grim smile. “ And this Lawyer Severn back in the waggon has come out all the way from England just to have a yarn with Rube. And Rube’s dead—dead ! He could have put them on the trail, though ; none better. I wonder what that advertisement said, and what the sharks wanted with Reginald

Fritton, anyway. Queer that they should search for him after an absence of seventeen years!" He glanced again at the letter. "No," he pursued, "I don't gather, after all, that they're particularly anxious to have him back. 'Tisn't himself they want. What they really wish for is legal proof of his death, and that's just the information that poor Rube would have been most puzzled to supply."

He filled his pipe, lighted it, and for a long time sat in his saddle with arms folded, meditatively watching the smoke curl outward into the sunlit air, while Snowdrop nibbled at the grass.

Presently there came to him the low rumbling of the waggon's wheels, and the sharp crack of the teamster's whip. He waited for a while; but, when the waggon was close behind him, he continued his way, keeping always within easy hailing distance.

Kiddie, who sat on the front seat of the waggon beside the driver, kept his eyes ever upon the rider and his white horse, watching for any sign from him which might tell of possible danger.

At noon a halt was made, a fire was lighted, and a meal prepared, and it was then only that Buckskin Jack rejoined his fellow-travellers.

Mr. Severn invited him to share the contents of his well-filled hamper; and began by offering him a glass of red wine.

"I have been wishing for the past hour or two that you would fall back and have a chat with me," Mr. Severn remarked, going in front of Buck and looking up into his dark, bearded face. "I want to ask you about this poor fellow, Carter. My son tells me that you knew him, and that he had been educated at Eton College."

Buck thrust his thumbs into his belt, and contemplated the little solicitor for a moment in silence.

"Knew him?" he presently repeated in his drawling tone. "Yes, I guess I knew him, when first he came out to the States, some seventeen or eighteen years ago."

Mr. Severn and Geoff, who was now beside him, exchanged meaning glances. They had long held the belief that Rube Carter was himself the missing Captain Fritton, and this

information as to his having been at Eton and as to the number of years he had been absent from England seemed to confirm their belief.

"He was an officer, I believe," said Mr. Severn, looking inquiringly into the frontiersman's blue eyes.

"Was he?" returned Buck dubiously. "I knew he'd been a soldier. Cavalry, I reckon; for there ain't many men on the trail to come up to him for horsemanship."

"Yes, certainly he was in a cavalry regiment," assented the lawyer. "What's more, he had been on active service, and had won the Victoria Cross—that is a medal, you know, awarded for valour."

Buck stroked his beard to hide a smile.

"Guess you know heaps more about him than I do myself," he said. "This is the first time I've heard of him winning that medal, anyway. Wonder he never told me. Rube wasn't remarkable for modesty."

"Nevertheless," nodded Mr. Severn, "he was a V.C., and might even have been a general by now if he'd remained in the service instead of coming to a God-forsaken place like this."

Buck drew in his breath. Geoff Severn took it to be a sigh of regret at Carter's missed opportunities.

"It is most unfortunate our coming out here only to find him dead," Mr. Severn continued.

"Say, would you rather have found him alive, then?" inquired Buck, remembering what he had read in the letter.

"Why, of course," replied Mr. Severn, surprised at such a question. "So much—everything, in fact—depended upon my seeing him and questioning him and having proof of his identity."

Buck looked at him curiously.

"Proof of his identity?" he repeated, assuming ignorance of the lawyer's meaning. "Why, I can produce a score of men who will give you proof that the dead man is Reuben Carter. The young half-breed, who escaped from the Indians back in One Tree Gulch, will swear to his identity right now if you like, seeing that they lived together at Birkenshaw's ranch."

"Ah?" Mr. Severn looked around for Kiddie, to whom he had not spoken since attending to the boy's wounds. But Kiddie was nowhere to be seen. He had, in fact, slipped away as soon as the waggon came to a halt.

Buck also searched for him near and far, and descreed him at last, moving stealthily along the ridge of a neighbouring hill, apparently watching something that was occurring in the valley beyond.

By his cautious movements, he seemed to be stalking a bear or some other big game to which he wanted to get near enough to have a shot, for he carried a gun.

Presently he dropped upon his hands and knees, crept onward for a few yards, dragging his gun with him, and then lay down at full length, intently watching.

Buck abruptly left his companions, and strode quickly away in Kiddie's direction over the steep rough ground that intervened. Kiddie remained as motionless as if he were a part of the hill upon which he was lying. But, as Buck advanced towards him, he slowly raised his head and glanced round. He raised his hand, beckoning cautiously. Buck crept to him warily, bending almost double as he came level with the ridge.

Kiddie pointed downward to the near slopes of the green valley beyond.

"Look!" he whispered excitedly.

Following the direction indicated, Buck then perceived the figures of three Indians riding at a walking pace along a level shelf of ground hardly a hundred yards away. They must have passed only a few minutes earlier close by the spot where Kiddie lay silently watching them. They rode abreast, the two at the outsides leaning each toward the other with outstretched arms supporting the one between, who kept his seat with difficulty, swaying to and fro, as if he might fall. Buck judged that he was either ill, or else badly hurt.

"Well?" he breathed. He saw no reason to be alarmed. "They ain't any concern of ours. They'll do no harm. Guess they intend to join the other lot that chased you."

Kiddie raised himself on his elbows and pointed again, this time along the valley to where, a mile or so away, between

two rugged hills, there stretched a grassy plain, dotted over with Indian lodges and grazing horses.

"That's where they're going—to their village," he whispered back. "No," he added, "they'll do no harm. Your outfit is safe from them. But that's not what troubles me. I'm puzzled about these three here. They're from Birkenshaw's, sure. And the middle one—the one that's being helped—that's their great war chief. That's Eye-of-the-Moon!"

"Eye-of-the-Moon?" exclaimed Buck, in amazement. "But you told me he was dead—that you yourself shot him!"

"That's so," admitted Kiddie, sorely perplexed. "I saw him fall. I took his war-bonnet from him, and the medal. Gid Birkenshaw saw him, too, lying there still as a log. Gid reckoned he was dead, same as I did. But there he is now—alive, with Rube Carter's scalp still hanging from his belt. Wait!"

Kiddie levelled his gun. It was Buckskin Jack's own Winchester, and he was glancing along the shining barrel, aiming at the chief.

Quick as a lightning flash, Buck seized the weapon.

"Coward!" he cried. "Would you fire on a wounded man?"

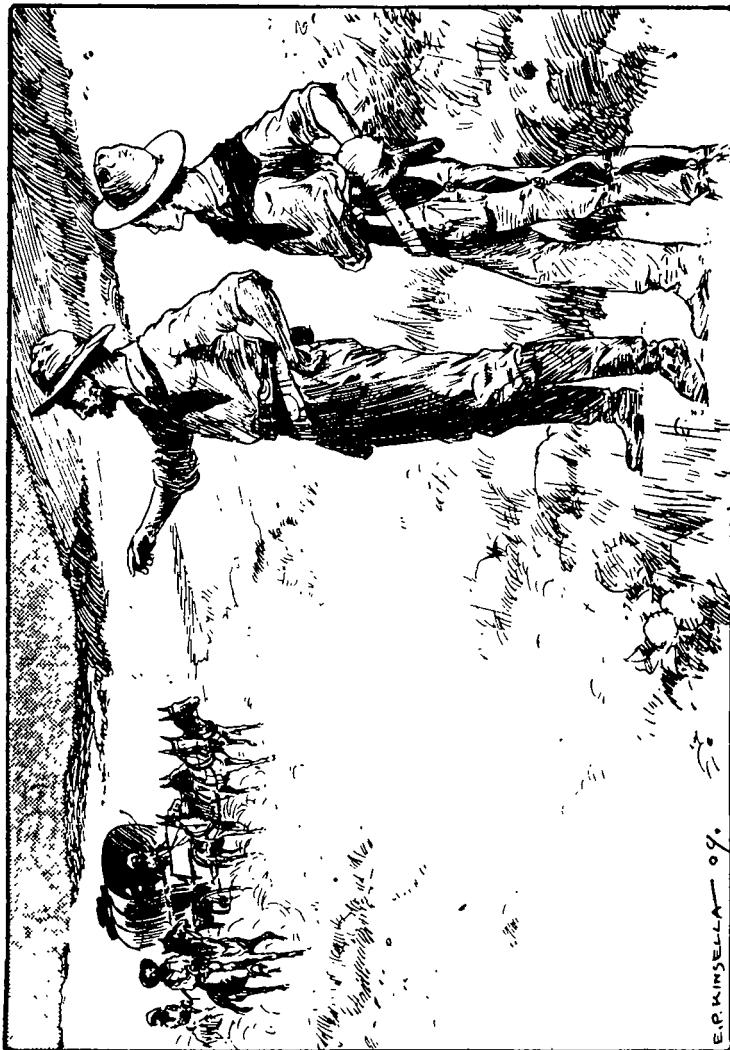
CHAPTER VI

CROSS QUESTIONS

MEE-MEE heard the rumbling of the heavy wheels long before the prairie waggon itself loomed into sight on the brow of the nearest hill, with Kiddie running in advance, and she wandered down to the cart track to await its coming, anxious to hear the earliest news of Rube. Gideon Birkenshaw had hidden from her the fact that he had himself seen Rube Carter's scalp in the possession of Eye-of-the-Moon, and that it was useless for her to hope to see her husband again in life ; but Mee-Mee had already guessed that some grave evil had happened, or Rube's pony would not surely have come home riderless. Since her return earlier in the day from Three Crossings, where she had duly delivered the mail, she had waited wearily, and with every hour that passed she grew more and more certain that Rube had fallen a victim to the Indians—doubtless the same Indians who had been here at the ranch during her absence, and who had killed Nat Bixbee, Lew Denver, and Chet Timson.

During that day she had silently helped in the work of clearing away all the gruesome signs of the fight with the Sioux. The dead could not be buried without an official certificate, but Mee-Mee had given the alarm at Three Crossings that Indians were in the neighbourhood, and she had been closely followed by a party of cowboys, and with them had come Isa Blagg, the deputy sheriff of the district, who acted as coroner, and gave the required permission for burial.

These cowboys informed Gideon Birkenshaw that another ranch than his own had been raided that same morning by a separate band of Redskins, who had stolen over fifty horses,



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"Whose outfit is this coming along?"

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massacred the ranch master and his family, and left the ranch in flames. Word had been sent by messengers to the various stations for miles around, summoning a meeting of frontiersmen, who were to start at once on the track of the savages, and deal swift vengeance. The meeting was to be here at Birkenshaw's an hour before the next moonrise.

Mee-Mee ran up the sloping track to meet Kiddie, wondering what had become of his horse. He came to a stop in front of her, and she saw that he had been hurt.

"Rube? Where?" she implored.

Kiddie pointed with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Back there in the waggon," he answered her.

She stared at him inquiringly for an instant, then took a step forward to run on to the approaching waggon. But he held her.

"No use," he warned her. "Rube's dead—Injuns—One Tree Gulch."

Understanding, Mee-Mee staggered, clasping her hands to her temples, and then turned slowly, and walked with bowed head back to the place where she knew that the waggon would pull up. Kiddie followed her, not attempting to disturb her grief.

At the foot of the slope they were met by Gideon Birkenshaw.

"Say, what's gotten Rosebud, then?" Gideon asked of Kiddie.

"I'd a brush with a party of Sioux back in One Tree Gulch," Kiddie explained. "The mare got a bullet in her head."

"Sorry for that," nodded the boss. "Best pony I've known for years. But better her than yourself. Whose outfit is this coming along?"

"Belongs to that desperado of a chap they call Buckskin Jack," Kiddie informed him. "He's bringing along a lawyer man and his son from England. They count upon putting up with you here at the ranch for a night or two."

Gideon frowned.

"Rather an awkward time for visitors when there's Injuns knocking around," he objected. "And this here ranch ain't

a hotel, anyway. I calculate they'd better move on to Three Crossings. You didn't find anything of Rube Carter along the trail, did you ? "

Kiddie glanced towards the waggon that was now approaching along the level ground.

"They've brought his body home in the waggon," he announced. " 'Twasn't me that found him." He paused for some moments, and then added, "The skunk that killed him and took his scalp ain't dead, after all."

Gideon showed no surprise at this information.

"No," he nodded. "Two of his braves sneaked back for him and carried him off. I made out that you hadn't finished him. I reckon he was only stunned, or else that he was playing 'possum when we saw him lying there back of the cabin. Yet he looked dead. Guess you'd ha' done heaps better'n you did if you'd made sure by taking his scalp. That's what you ought to ha' done, Kiddie. You ought to ha' taken his scalp. As things are—well, I reckon we ain't seen the last of him."

The waggon had now come to a halt. Buckskin Jack dismounted and strode towards the boss, followed by Mr. Severn and Geoff.

"How do, friend Gideon ?" said Buck, holding forth his ungloved hand. "A considerable time since we last met, eh ?"

"Yes," nodded Birkenshaw. "Not since we were in the fight together at Beacon Hollow. You're changed some, I notice. Shouldn't ha' known you."

Buck turned to introduce the lawyer.

"Mr. Severn has come out from England purpose to see Rube Carter," he announced. "I guess you can help him, Rube being dead."

"Ah !" reflected Gideon. "Friend of Rube's, was he ? That makes a difference. We must make room for him, and entertain him the same as if Rube was here."

He instructed the men to unharness and stable the team, and to unload the waggon. Joe Burrelle and Wal Hoskin between them prepared to carry Rube Carter's body, still with its covering of the Union Jack, and Mee-Mee, watching

them, presently followed. The boss then led Mr. Severn up the pathway among the trees.

"We can make you kind of comfortable here for a week or two, mister," he turned to say, as they came within view of the log cabin topping the wooded height. "That is, if you ain't too particular to stand simple frontier fare. For we take no account of luxuries and feather beds out West."

"You are very kind," responded the lawyer, "but we shall hardly trespass upon your hospitality for so long. A couple of days will be the extent of our stay. You see, my business here has come to an abrupt end, owing to the very tragic death of—of Mr. Carter."

"Relation of yours, perhaps?" suggested Birkenshaw. "I allow poor Rube was English, but I never heard him make mention of you."

Gideon had a vague idea that all Englishmen were related to each other, or, at least, that they were intimately acquainted.

"No, he was not related to me in any way," returned Mr. Severn, following the boss across the narrow footbridge that spanned the trench in which he had lately lain in ambush watching the approaching Redskins.

A party of the cowboys from Three Crossings lounged about the verandah. One of them strode towards Birkenshaw.

"Say, boss," he said. "I see Buckskin Jack has just arrived with this here outfit. D'youth notion he'd be willin' to lead the boys on the raid we've planned for to-night?"

"Wal, he's the best man for the job, I reckon," agreed Gideon, "and, seein' as how he's allus death on Redskins, anyhow—why, he ain't likely to have more pressin' business. He'll be up here at the cabin in a minute or two, and I'll jes' lay the matter before him if you're too backward to do it yerself. Say, d'youth count on takin' young Kiddie along of you? Guess he'd help you some. There ain't his equal for scoutin' 'tween here and Leavenworth."

Kiddie was at that moment climbing the steep bank by a short cut to the winding path in company with Geoff Severn.

"Not half a bad place to live in," Geoff remarked, in boyish appreciation of his new surroundings. "It's miles better than

Red Pine, where we stayed last night. I should say we ought to get lots of good sport in the forest over yonder. Is there much game here ? ”

“ Heaps,” answered Kiddie. “ Prairie chicken, blue grouse, wild turkey, and duck, as well as fish in the river.”

“ Yes, I dare say ; but I mean big game. Aren’t there any buffaloes ? ”

Kiddie shook his head.

“ They’re most all killed off. There used to be plenty around here years back. I’ve seen thousands of them grazing on the plains ’tween here and Fort Laramie. The prairie was just black with them. I got thrown from my pony once by a great stub-horn bull, and shot him dead as he was making a second charge. That’s the only one I ever killed. Abe Harum can tell you more’n I can about buffaloes.”

“ Any bears ? ” pursued Geoff, “ or wolves ? ”

Kiddie paused, and pointed aside among the pines.

“ Just against that tree with the red trunk, Abe Harum killed a grizzly three or four months back,” he said. “ The skin’s under the bed you’ll be sleeping in to-night. Wolves ? Well, yes. I reckon there’s wolves, too, in winter time. Abe was attacked by a pack of ’em last December, riding along the trail with the Express. Abe’s our best shot, next to Rube Carter.”

Geoff stood aside to allow Mee-Mee to go in front of him across the footbridge. He watched her until she had disappeared into the cabin.

“ That girl looks as if she had just stepped out of a picture book, moccasins and all,” he said. “ I suppose she’s an Indian squaw ? I never saw one before. What’s she doing here ? ”

“ That’s Rube Carter’s wife, or, rather, his widow,” Kiddie told him. Geoff looked at him sharply.

“ His wife ? ” he repeated. “ Oh, he was married, was he ? That suggests complications. I must tell my father. Any children ? ”

Kiddie shook his head.

“ No. Why do you ask ? ”

“ Perhaps it’s a good thing he’d no family,” Geoff went on.

"It would look rather queer if we were to take home a mongrel half-caste Indian and present him to London society as a representative English nobleman. It would have been different if Reuben Carter, as he called himself, had been still alive. He was at least thoroughbred."

Kiddie was himself a half-caste, and could lay no claim to being thoroughbred; but he did not resent Geoff's contemptuous references to his kind.

"I don't just understand you," he said. "I've often read in books and newspapers about English noblemen—earls, dukes, lords, and such-like; but we don't take much account of 'em in the wilds of Wyoming."

"I suppose not," returned Geoff. "You haven't got any aristocracy in the United States, where all men are equal. In England we think a lot of a man who is born to a title, and who inherits rich estates. And, when the heir to a peerage and a big fortune disappears and hides himself under an assumed name in an outlandish place like this, we do our level best to find him. That's why my father has come out here after Reuben Carter."

Kiddie came to an abrupt stand, and planted a foot against the mossy bank.

"I begin to see daylight now," he said. "You make out that Rube Carter was heir to a fortune, and you wanted him to go home to enjoy it. Pity you didn't come a few days earlier. He might have been alive now if you had. But, if he was an heir, why ever did he leave England? Why was he content to live here as a Pony Express man, earning no more than a few dollars a week?"

"Oh, but he didn't know," Geoff hastened to explain. "When he left England, he was a poverty-stricken cavalry officer, and—well, I believe he got into some disgrace in his regiment. Anyway, he threw up his commission and mysteriously disappeared."

"I see." Kiddie prodded with his foot against the mossy bank. "I calculate that's just why he never spoke of it—if he didn't know. But how didn't he know?"

"Well, you see," Geoff resumed, "when he disappeared, seventeen or eighteen years ago, he hadn't any expectations

that way. He was the second of three sons, and their father hadn't yet been raised to the peerage. The father, Lord St. Olave, died about six years ago, and, of course, his eldest son then took his place. This second Lord St. Olave had no son, and when he, too, died, which was last January, from a fall in the hunting field, then your friend, Reuben Carter, as he called himself, stood to inherit the lot—the title, the estates, and the fortune. But he couldn't be found, and no one knew whether he was dead or alive. His younger brother, Gabriel, who is also dead, left a son, who was a chum of my own at Eton, and is now up to Oxford, an awfully nice chap, and a ripping bowler. He was captain of our house eleven."

"I figure that chum of yours isn't very anxious that you should find his uncle," reflected Kiddie.

"Well," smiled Geoff. "There's a lot of difference between being Lord St. Olave, with no end of money, and being plain Harold Fritton. There isn't much in being an Honourable, you know. Besides, he has an idea that his uncle Reginald wouldn't be exactly an ornament to the House of Lords after being away from civilisation so many years."

Kiddie had started forward eagerly at mention of these names.

"Fritton? Reginald?" he repeated. "Do you say that Rube Carter's true name was Reginald Fritton?"

"You seem to have heard it before," smiled Geoff.

"Can't say it's altogether strange to me," responded Kiddie, thinking of the bronze medal that he had found hung round the neck of Eye-of-the-Moon. "But I'm some puzzled. I ain't accustomed to figuring out this kind of problem. 'Tain't just in my line."

"Of course, we can take home legal proof of his death," Geoff resumed, "so our journey won't have been useless."

"And I presume you will also be taking Mee-Mee?" suggested Kiddie.

"Mee-Mee?" said Geoff. "Who or what's that? Oh, you mean his widow—the Indian squaw?"

"Ain't she Lady St. Olave, anyhow?" questioned Kiddie, with a quickness of understanding which rather surprised his companion.

"I suppose you're right so far as that goes," Geoff acquiesced thoughtfully. "She'd look an interesting object in a London drawing-room, with her beads and moccasins, but I don't think it will be necessary for her to leave her native wilds. No doubt, my father, who is the family lawyer, will settle things to her ladyship's satisfaction."

"Say, I'm curious to know how your father located Rube—how he got on his trail," pursued Kiddie. "No one at Birkenshaw's notioned that his name was Reginald Fritton and not Reuben Carter, and you tell me that Rube himself never guessed he was a lord."

"Not until he saw the advertisement in the agony column of the *Times*," Geoff explained. "Buckskin Jack knows a lot about him, though—knows that he was educated at Eton, and was a cavalry officer, and had won the Victoria Cross for bravery on the battlefield."

"The Victoria Cross?" Kiddie repeated wonderingly. "Say, is that a sort of bronze token with a lion on top of a crown, and 'For Valour' printed on it?"

Geoff nodded.

"Yes. How did you know? You can't have seen one."

"I just have," Kiddie assured him. "I've seen the one you mention, that belonged to Captain Reginald Fritton. Buck has it. I guess he'll show it you if you ask him. Here he is, coming along to us."

Buck was leading his horse up the path. Geoff and Kiddie waited until he was abreast of them. He halted, looking at Kiddie.

"Can't say I notice many signs of the fight you told me of," he remarked. "Where are all your dead Indians, anyway?"

"Guess they're all buried," Kiddie answered him. "I see a pile of their guns and tomahawks and things alongside the verandah steps. Say, do you object to showing the Victoria Cross I gave you this morning, back in the gulch? Severn, here, would like to have a look at it. He reckons he knows where it came from."

Buck's face went very red under its sunburn. He hesitated, glancing awkwardly from Kiddie to Geoff.

"Do you mind?" urged Geoff. "I should like awfully to see it."

Buck moved his Winchester from one arm to the other, but his free hand went nowhere near to his pocket.

"Why?" he inquired.

It was Kiddie who answered.

"Seems it originally belonged to Rube Carter," he said, "and that it has got Rube's name written on the back of it. I've just been hearing queer things about Rube. I'm told he was an English nobleman, without knowing it, and that there was a pile of money waiting for him to claim over in England. Mr. Severn, the lawyer man that you've brought along, has come West to straighten things out."

"Eh?" Buck stared in bewilderment at young Severn. "An English nobleman? That ain't possible. No. I don't feel like swallowing a tall romance like that. Seems to me Mr. Severn has struck a false trail somehow. It occurred to me a while back that he'd missed the scent, and that he is at present engaged in a wild goose chase."

"Excuse me," Geoff Severn retorted warmly. "My father, who is an eminent lawyer, isn't in the least likely to have made a mistake, or to have come out here on a wild goose chase. He has been in correspondence with Reuben Carter."

Buck's piercing blue eyes were fixed steadily upon the English boy.

"I ain't ignorant that there's been some correspondence," he drawled. "As a matter of fact, I found a letter, written, I presume, by your father, in Rube's pocket this morning. I intend to give it up to Mr. Severn presently when I locate him. Naturally, I took the liberty of reading it, but I didn't gather from it that Rube claimed to be an English nobleman. Indeed, the letter doesn't say anything about his being heir to either a title or to the pile of money that Kiddie here mentioned just now."

Geoff Severn turned a sharp, almost suspicious, look upon Buck.

"You seem anxious to argue that he couldn't be," he remarked.

"Well," returned Buck, "now that Rube's dead, I don't figure that it matters a heap whether he was a lord or whether he wasn't."

"Indeed, it matters a lot to someone at home in England," Geoff pursued.

"Say, Buck," interposed Kiddie, "there ain't no use your argufying any. Mr. Severn's been on Rube's trail for a long while back, and he's figured it all out that Rube's name was the same as the one on the medal. You just look and see."

"So?" exclaimed Buck in surprise, producing the medal from his pocket. He turned it over in his palm, examining it, reverse and obverse. "I don't see Rube's name anywhere here," he announced, "and I ain't growing anyways blind."

He handed the cross to Geoff Severn, who seized it excitedly.

"This is certainly a Victoria Cross," he decided. "Yes, and what's more here is his name on it, as plain as a pikestaff — 'Captain Reginald Fritton'!"

"Ah!" laughed Buck. "Now I am certain sure that you and your father are wandering on a false trail."

Geoff looked at him from under frowning brows. He was obviously greatly disconcerted by the frontiersman's denial of Rube Carter's identity with the missing heir.

"But," he protested, "you admitted yourself that Carter was English, that he had been to Eton, that he had been in the British Army, and that he had come out here as long as seventeen years ago."

"Sure," admitted Buck. "There ain't any denying he was English. But his name wasn't Fritton; it was Cartwright—Robert Cartwright. He was at Eton, I allow; but only because he was the son of one of the tutors—a house-master, I believe you'd call him. Afterwards, when his father died, leaving him penniless, he entered the Army, but simply as a trooper. He never rose to be an officer, and I'm ready to swear that he never owned that Victoria Cross you're looking at so attentively."

Very gloomily Geoff handed the medal back to him.

"You seem to know a jolly lot about him, one way and another," he said ; "but whether I believe you or not is quite another matter. I may tell you plainly that I don't."

Buck chuckled audibly as he led his pony away along the path that crossed in front of the cabin towards the horse sheds and the corral.

"Somehow," said Geoff, when the tall, handsome frontiersman was beyond earshot, "I instinctively dislike and mistrust that fellow. I wouldn't believe him on his oath."

"Ain't that rather a hard thing to say of a man you know so little ?" questioned Kiddie. "Seems to me it's unjust. I'd advise you not to say it in his hearing. Buck has been known to shoot a man dead for calling him a liar."

"I should expect him to do a brutal thing like that," returned Geoff. "It's clear he doesn't set much value on human life. I've noticed that his hand is never very far from his revolver. This morning, when he saved you from those Indians, I thought him a hero ; for it was a plucky thing to do. But, now that I've seen a bit more of him, I haven't the slightest doubt that he's a desperado of the deepest dye."

"Maybe you're reckoning him up by your English standard 'stead of ours," observed Kiddie. "Western men don't pretend to be saints exactly, and they're not. They're rough and reckless, and they ain't above taking the law into their own hands. But there's one thing they take a heap of pride in, and that's just speaking the truth. Their tongues are not forked. Even the Indians would tell you that."

Geoff Severn walked on a few strides in sullen silence.

"I suppose," he presently rejoined, "you'd have me believe that what he said about Reuben Carter was the truth ?"

"Why, certainly," was Kiddie's ready response. "I'm no better acquainted with him than you are, except by reputation ; but I guess he wouldn't be respected as he is along the trail if he were capable of telling a lie."

In front of the verandah, as the two boys approached, Mee-Mee was kneeling by the body of her husband, from which she had drawn its covering of the Union Jack. Gideon

Birkenshaw, Abe Harum, and Mr. Severn stood amid the onlooking crowd.

The lawyer beckoned his son to his side.

"It's rather a ghastly sight—a fellow who has been riddled with bullets and arrows and scalped by Redskins," he declared. "I refrained from looking at it while it was behind us in the waggon ; but it was my legal duty to view the body, you know, and a good thing I did. For it is obvious to me now that we've been making a huge mistake in supposing that Carter might be our missing heir."

"But isn't he ?" murmured Geoff, pressing forward.

"No," answered his father, with conviction. "Reginald Fritton, as you will remember by the written description of him, was dark, as all his family are, or have been. He is described as having black hair and a black moustache. This man's hair, you see, is red—unmistakably red."

Geoff looked down into the dead man's distorted face, with its flowing golden moustache matted with dry blood, and at what remained of his long russet locks.

"Good gracious !" he ejaculated, drawing away from the unpleasant sight. "So it is ! And Buck is right, after all !"

CHAPTER VII

A MAN OF GRIT

"D'you count on making a move pretty soon?" Gideon Birkenshaw inquired, prodding the sleeping frontiersman with his toe. "The boys are 'most ready to start."

Buck opened his eyes and stared at the old man lazily. He had been asleep for the past two hours.

"How many have turned up?" he asked, rising to his feet and tightening his belt.

"Should say there wasn't many short of fifty," Gideon answered slowly, "enough to wipe out the whole band if you drop on 'em unawares. You'll relish a drink of coffee 'fore you go out, maybe?" he added, removing a pot from the stove to the table.

When he had taken the coffee Buck saw to his Winchester and revolvers and his stock of cartridges, then strolled out on to the verandah. The sun had set in a blaze of crimson and gold; the afterglow in the western sky had slowly faded, and now the soft grey mists of evening veiled the mountains. He crossed to the tie-post where a mustang other than his own Snowdrop was waiting, and examined the animal critically.

"Reckon you'll do," he decided, stroking its smooth velvet muzzle before leaping to the saddle.

He rode down the bridle path to the wider wagon track, and looked in turn to right and left at the horsemen who were gathered there under the shadows of the pines.

During the past hour the men had been arriving at Birkenshaw's in parties of two or three, and now, as Gideon had said, there were some forty or fifty of them, all well armed, and all eager to start upon the projected expedition of vengeance against the Sioux.

Buck was to lead them. There was no disputing his claim to leadership. His reputation for skill in Indian warfare stood so high that there was not a dissentient voice when Isa Blagg proposed that he should undertake the responsibility, and he, on his own part, had expressed no unwillingness to take the command.

He went among them now, giving an eye to their firearms and their supply of ammunition. There was little need for him to inquire into the condition of their mounts. The frontiersmen knew too well the vital importance of keeping their horses in good form to be careless in this particular, and none would have dreamed of engaging in such an expedition on a pony that was not perfectly sound in wind and limb. One horse only did Buck dismiss, and this because its white colour presented the danger of being too easily discerned by watchful Indian eyes. It was for the same reason that he had left his own Snowdrop in Birkenshaw's corral, choosing to take in exchange the black mustang upon which he was now seated.

"I reckon it's most time we moved," he said to those who were nearest to him, "though we could well have done with a bigger muster. Are there any more likely to turn up?"

"Don't know who else you can expect," said Lal Putnam. "There ain't a camp for thirty miles around that ain't represented, 'cept Westrop's. Don't reckon there's anyone from Westrop's yet."

Buck turned to Mr. Severn, who stood near him.

"You ain't feeling like coming along with us, sir, I suppose?" he smiled.

The English lawyer shook his head decisively and moved a step backward.

"I should be an encumbrance," he answered. "I could do nothing. I should be worse than useless. Give me a sporting rifle and a few rabbits to pot at in a stubble field at short range, and I might be able to render a fair account of myself. I assure you I'm far from being afraid, but I'm no hand at fighting, and this is far too serious a business for the like of me to engage in."

"Your assurance is hardly necessary," returned Buck.

" You're English, and I'm told your countrymen are not cowards. After all, someone must stay behind to mind the shanty and the corral. If you'll just hang around here and send on any of the boys that may come later I shall be obliged. Your son will keep you company. He wanted to come badly, but I'm afraid he wouldn't be of great use, for I calculate they're not likely to have taught him any soldiering at Eton."

He turned sharply at the sound of quickly beating hoofs along the trail.

" Some chap seems afraid of being left behind," he said. " What's his great hurry, I wonder ? "

The clatter of hoofs came rapidly nearer, betokening unusual haste, and very soon the horseman dashed into sight. His horse was snorting noisily, and a cloud of vapour rose from its sweating body as the rider pulled up abruptly in the midst of the waiting cowboys.

" Thought you was one of the Pony Express, rattling along at that mad rate," said Buck, going up to him and flashing the ray of a bull's-eye lantern upon the new arrival. " Why, your pony's most fit to drop—clean done up ! Where are you from, anyway ? "

The rider was breathing as heavily as his horse, and his face was ashen white in the gleam of the lantern. His eyes were staring wildly, and he trembled violently.

" It's young Jake Paterson, from Sweetwater Bridge," announced Isa Blagg. " What's come over you, Jake, boy ? "

" Heaps," Jake panted, staring about him at the surrounding faces. " Who's going to boss this here campaign ? "

" Buckskin Jack, I reckon," returned the deputy sheriff. " Buck's been elected 'nanimously. Why ? Any objection ? Hev you got an amendment to perpose ? "

" Not I," Jake answered, calming himself. " I don't care, to long's he's a man of grit, and ready to start right now."

He glanced about him nervously, and then nodded with evident satisfaction on seeing that the company was so large, and composed of men well known to him for their daring and determination. He turned to Buck.

" Dick Westrop's ranch, east of Sweetwater Bridge, was

raided by the Sioux this morning," he reported. "Dick and Mrs. Westrop and all his boys were massacred and scalped ; the hosses all stampeded. There ain't a soul left alive. The skunks hev carried off the women folk—taken 'em prisoners—d'ye hear ? "

" What's that you say ? " cried Buck in quick consternation. " The women carried off ? "

" Yep," Jake nodded gravely, " and my sweetheart along of 'em—Liza Westrop and her sister Jess, and the Pawnee gal that did the chores. They're all three of 'em took."

Buck turned excitedly to his men.

" Say, boys," he cried aloud, " d'ye hear ? This journey's going to be more serious than we figured. The Indians have carried off two white girls. Well, we've just got to rescue those girls. That's our objective. No ! " he commanded imperatively, as the horses started at the ready touch of spurs. " Don't rush off 'fore you've got your marching orders. We've to move more cautiously than ever now. It won't do to make an open attack. We've got to advance upon them craftily, in skirmishing order, taking them by surprise. But we can do nothing until our scouts come in. They're to join us back of White Bull Ridge. I guess you needn't be told that there must be no talking, no sound of champing bits or jingling stirrups. And the man who attempts to light a pipe'll be sent right back. White Bull Ridge is our rendezvous. That's all I've got to say. And now I reckon we may start."

These rough, lawless men of the Far West were not accustomed to being commanded, but there was something in Buckskin Jack—a determination in his voice and manner—which compelled obedience even in the most desperate and undisciplined of them. It was as though they instinctively acknowledged in him an inborn superiority. And so, without demur or question, they trailed off in Indian file.

An hour before sunset Buck had sent out a party of four scouts—his own two men Burrelle and Hoskin, Abe Harum, and Kiddie—with instructions to approach the Indians' encampment by separate ways, ascertain the exact position of the village, the best means of secretly reaching it, and to

estimate the number of warriors in the band. Having obtained this information they were to meet in the valley between Little Creek and White Bull Ridge. This latter was the name of the low hill from which Kiddie had discovered and watched the wounded Sioux chief, riding with his two attendant braves in the direction of their lodges at the end of the valley.

Kiddie had been chosen as one of the scouts partly because Gideon Birkenshaw had especially recommended him for his skill in tracking, and partly because he already knew where the Indians were encamped; but there was another recommendation in the circumstance that it would be so easy for him to disguise himself as a Redskin.

He had thought of wearing Eye-of-the-Moon's war-bonnet, but he had quickly realised that such a distinguished head-dress would draw special attention to him if he should be seen by the enemy's sentries, so instead he donned a feathered head-dress of his own, painted his face, and completed his disguise with blanket and moccasins. He even rode his mustang bare-backed and with a halter instead of bridle reins, so that any Redskin, seeing him in the dark, might readily mistake him for one of his own kind.

He was mounted on Sweetwater, a piebald mare that had belonged to Rube Carter, and was reputed to be able to feel and smell her way across the prairie on the darkest night or through the most blinding blizzard.

Burrelle, Hoskin, and Abe Harum were sent out in company by the great trail along which the prairie waggon had recently travelled, but Kiddie went alone by a different route, making a wide detour, so that he might approach the enemy from an opposite direction.

He rode across Birkenshaw's pasture lands, and over a wide stretch of rough, undulating ground, overgrown with stubbly buffalo grass, and sage brush and cactus. Even from the time of starting his search for signs of Indians began. Not a tree or rock or hillock that could hide a lurking Redskin escaped his keen glance.

He soon came upon the trail of the Sioux who had accompanied Eye-of-the-Moon to Birkenshaw's in the early morning;

but this did not concern him, and he rode on with his back to the setting sun towards a long range of foot-hills that rose in gentle slopes from the nearer Sweetwater river, with its fringe of willows.

He intended to follow the course of the stream. It would lead him round to the bend of Little Creek and the valley in which he expected to find the enemy's encampment. In the meantime it was important that he should not himself be seen by any of the Indian outposts, and to ensure this he had resolved to shield himself in the shadows of the trees.

Once or twice as he came near to the timber he was aware of the track of a horse in front of him. None of his fellow scouts had come by this way. He began to wonder, but without alarm. For some distance he followed the indistinct trail in the dry grass, crossing a patch of sand, where the hoofmarks were unmistakably fresh. It was evident to him that the rider had come from the direction of Birkenshaw's immediately in advance of him. He searched for a return trail, but found none. Presently his eye caught something moving among the trees. It was a horse, which he quickly recognised as belonging to Gideon Birkenshaw. No rider was visible.

Kiddie rode up to it cautiously, and, dismounting, tethered his own pony to a neighbouring tree. Then, very silently, he crept forward to the top of the river's bank, and peered down the slope to the water's edge. There was a rustle among the reeds a few yards in front of him. He crept still nearer, and, presently, beyond a boulder that was splashed by a gleam of rosy light from the setting sun, he saw the crouching figure of Rube Carter's squaw.

She was on her knees now. Her bare left arm was thrust far in under the boulder stone, and by her side there was a small black tin box, in which, as Kiddie well knew, Rube Carter had been in the habit of keeping letters and papers.

He drew back from the boulder, but not before Mee-Mee had detected the movement of his shadow. She looked across at him guiltily, and then quickly thrust the box into the cavity she had made under the rock.

"You no say what you see," she said cautiously, fixing her large and very beautiful dark eyes upon him

"Tain't none o' my business," he answered her. "Though I'm curious to know why you had a notion of burying Rube's box that way, 'specially when it's empty."

She gave a start of surprised consternation.

"Empty?" she repeated. "What you mean?"

"Just what I'm saying," pursued Kiddie. "'Tain't more'n an hour ago that the English lawyer man was asking Boss Birkenshaw to let him have a look at any papers Rube had left. The boss just gave him liberty to take what he liked out of that box, and I guess he took the lot."

"Sure?" Mee-Mee's eyes flashed in indignation.

"Don't suppose he'll do any sort of harm," Kiddie assured her. "He's come out here all the way from Europe purpose to see Rube. He'd a notion that Rube was a great chief, you see, and wanted to take him back with him and give him all the horses and cattle and lodges that belonged to him. I guess Rube would have taken you along with him, 'cross the big sea, and you'd have been a boss squaw over in England, wearing moccasins trimmed with di'monds, 'stead of glass beads, and you could have had just everything you liked to wish for. Mr. Severn wanted to have a look at those papers just to make sure whether Rube was the right man or not, and you ain't doing any good by hiding the box under that rock. I guess you'd best take it to Birkenshaw's right now."

Mee-Mee shook her head resolutely, and Kiddie saw her hand go to her belt, where she carried a long knife and a pair of revolvers. She glanced eastward in the direction in which White Bull Ridge lay beyond the intervening hills.

"Eye-of-the-Moon he kill my Rube," she said. "Mee-Mee kill Eye-of-the-Moon."

Kiddie met her determined glance.

"I guess you'd best leave that kind of business to men," he warned her. "You ain't here by Buck's orders, and 'tain't anyways safe. You've got other chores to do, too. Gideon'll want your help with the cooking. Shouldn't wonder if he's searching round for you even now."

He strode to his pony and mounted, and rode in by the fringe of the wood, where, himself hidden, he could still keep

a watchful eye on the open land and the hill slopes. Once or twice he drew rein and listened, fancying that amid the murmur of the river and the rustle of the trees he heard suspicious sounds as of the echo of his pony's tread. He smiled as he divined its meaning. Presently he came to a break in the line of trees, and here, again, he halted, and looked about him expectantly. The sun had set, and the evening light was deepening to dusk. To his left was the wide, shallow river, and on its farther bank, as he expected, Mee-Mee appeared. She had followed him on the other side of the stream, and now she rode across the ford as unconcernedly as if their meeting here had been preappointed.

“How!” she called.

He rode towards her, intending to command her to return to the ranch, but she interrupted him, pointing to the bare ground.

“See!” she said, in a voice that was hardly audible above the gurgling of the water above its stony bed.

“I have seen,” Kiddie responded as he slipped to his feet.
“It's the trail of a band of Injuns, sure.”

CHAPTER VIII

SCOUT AGAINST SCOUT

THE sandy ground was thickly marked with the blurred impressions of many hoofs and moccasins, all pointing in the direction in which Kiddie was travelling. Slinging his gun over his back, he traced the footprints to the water's edge, where the sand was moist and the impressions were more distinct. Some of the horses, he observed, had been shod, indicating that they had been stolen. He estimated that a troop of some forty in all had crossed the ford. He was examining the trail in the lessening light when suddenly he gave an exclamation of astonishment, beckoning Mee-Mee to him.

"What d'you make of that?" he asked her, pointing to a footmark that was smaller than the rest and very distinct. "I'd reckon 'twas a woman's foot, wouldn't you?"

Mee-Mee, who had dismounted, bent over and contemplated the impression for a moment, placing her own small moccasined foot beside it.

"Sure," she agreed. "Pale-face woman, you bet." And then, speaking in her Pawnee tongue, which came easier to her, and which Kiddie understood, she intimated that the footprints were those of Liza Westrop—an inference which she drew from the fact that Liza was accustomed to wear shoes with high heels and pointed toes.

Kiddie remarked that two of the footmarks nearest the water were especially deep.

Someone had carried her across the stream, he argued, or she was perhaps on horseback, and this was why, when she alighted, her weight made the marks so deep. The girl's footprints were not obliterated by other tracks, and from this

circumstance he judged that Liza had been at the rear of the main body of her captors.

Searching about, he soon discovered a second set of shoe marks, different in size and shape from those of Liza, but unmistakably those of a white woman.

"They've got two women prisoners, anyway—maybe more," he decided. "I guess you ought to ride back to Birkenshaw's, Mee-Mee, and let the boys know about this. They've no news of the Sioux having been at Westrop's ranch, but it's clear they have been. And if they've carried off Liza and Jess you may bet your life they didn't leave any of the men with a scalp on his head."

It was already dusk, and Mee-Mee objected that by the time she got back to Birkenshaw's the boys would already have started. She pointed out that from where she and Kiddie now were it would be better for her to continue along the trail with him, and then make a slant to the south-east, and thus intercept Buckskin Jack and his company. And to this proposal Kiddie wisely agreed.

So they followed in the track of the Indians, keeping constant watch for the footprints of Liza Westrop, although as the darkness deepened this became more and more difficult, so much so that when at length they came to a stretch of marshy ground and dismounted they had to go down on their hands and knees to search. Here they found none but the marks of horses' hoofs, and Kiddie determined by the impressions that the Redskins had quickened their pace to a gallop.

"They're all of them mounted," he decided. "'Tain't any more use our tracking them. We know where they've gone to, though. They've gone off on a bee-line for their village, and we shall find them in the same place where Buck and I saw their lodges."

Still on his hands and knees, Kiddie prowled about, searching for further signs on the bare ground to assure himself that by some means the girls had not contrived to escape their savage captors; for he knew, as they did, the unspeakable horrors of their desperate situation. Back and back he went on the trail, trying to discover the spot where the

band had halted to take their prisoners on horseback. And at last he found it by the side of an old buffalo wallow, where, on a stretch of open ground, there were more footmarks than usual, not all going in a direct line, but crossed and confused. And in one place, where the impressions of the halting horses' feet were mingled with the footprints of the two girls and the softer marks of moccasins, there seemed to have been a struggle.

"Guess Liza and Jess calculated this was their last chance," he reflected. "Don't wonder they showed fight. But the Sioux have got them, sure."

Something white, lying in the dust, caught his eye. He bent over it, and, before touching it, sniffed. It was not a flower, and yet it gave forth a peculiarly sweet and pungent perfume. He picked it up and found that it was a piece of fine cloth edged with lace, such as a girl might wear about her neck. He sniffed at it twice or thrice.

"Liza Westrop ain't been the same girl since that time she went to St. Louis," he said to himself. "High-heeled shoes, finger rings, scented hankies, and all sorts of fashionable fixin's don't seem in tune with a lonely ranch. Guess Jake Paterson'll find her more than a trifle expensive."

Thrusting the piece of cambric into his pocket, he returned to Mee-Mee, and the pair of them remounted.

They were now within a mile of the encampment, and every step they took increased the danger of their being discovered by the Sioux scouts. Already Kiddie could hear a confused murmur as of far-off voices and the beating of drums. He recognised that he would soon have to proceed warily on foot, and he instructed Mee-Mee presently to ride to the rendezvous near White Bull Ridge and there communicate their discoveries to Abe Harum, who was to lie in concealment at a particular spot, midway between the bend of the creek and the ridge. Hurriedly, but very exactly, he pointed out the various landmarks by which she was to find her way, while he himself should penetrate within the circle of the enemy's outposts, and, if possible, discover where the two white prisoners were to be found, and where the wigwam of Eye-of-the-Moon was situated.

Mee-Mee's nearest and safest way lay round the foot of an abruptly rising hill, and to reach this her better plan was to accompany Kiddie for another quarter of a mile or so, and then take a course due southward.

They rode silently, Kiddie leading, both alertly watching and listening. They could detect the resinous smell of burning pine wood in the air, and a glow of light now and again was visible above the scrub in front of them. The murmur of human voices became more and more distinct.

Suddenly Kiddie's sharp eyes caught a tiny gleam of light like the twinkle of a star in the blackness of the rising ground towards which he was riding, but before he could check his pony the light had vanished. He turned and rode back a few paces and then slowly retraced his steps. The light reappeared. Evidently it was visible through some narrow gap. He dismounted, passing his halter to Mee-Mee.

"Wait!" he whispered, signing to her to take cover among some rocks and bushes. She slipped to the ground and led the two horses into the darker shadows.

Kiddie then crept stealthily forward, gliding silent as a cat from bush to rock and rock to bush, always with his eye upon the light, until he came to a high ridge of rocks broken by an abrupt cleft or natural passage, through which two men might walk abreast. Then he perceived that the light came from the camp fires of the Indians. There were many fires, and around them weird human shapes were moving and gesticulating strangely, as they carried tall poles from which were suspended the ghastly trophies of their recent raids. For, as Kiddie now well understood, the savages were engaged in a scalp dance to celebrate their success.

Not all of their bands had been successful. They had lost ten braves at Birkenshaw's, two in One Tree Gulch, and one at Westrop's; but they had brought home a score of scalps, three captives, and many horses, and their great war-chief Eye-of-the-Moon, whom for a time they had believed to be dead, had returned alive, covered with the glory of his wounds, albeit without his war-bonnet. Their dead comrades had gone to the happy hunting grounds, giving up their

earthly lives in honourable fight, and their deaths would speedily be avenged.

Kiddie watched the dancing crowds from his place of ambush. By the glow from the fires he could distinguish the conical shapes of the Indian wigwams, and beyond them and around them he could see vast troops of captured horses.

Himself a very Indian in stealthy movement, he crawled nearer and nearer on hands and knees, always watching, always calculating the enemy's strength ; but he had not gone far when from behind him there came the sharp call as of a disturbed night bird, sounding weird and shrill in the darkness. He stopped and sank down at full length in the grass. He knew that it was no bird's voice. Was it a challenge, intimating that he had been discovered, or could it be that Mee-Mee was calling him back, warning him of some danger unknown to himself ?

He boldly repeated the cry, and again it came to him, this time yet nearer. It seemed to him that there was something imperative in the call.

Very quickly he rose to his knees, and crept slowly, cautiously back, until he came once more to the gap in the barrier of rock. Suddenly a dark form moved stealthily in front of him. The dim glow from the fires flickered upon it, and he could make out a head and shoulders and two white feathers, and he knew that his way was barred by an Indian crouched low against the rock. He was aware that his own form must now be visible against the light, and he wondered if his disguise would save him. For an instant he turned his glance backward, but only to realise with a sinking at his heart that a warrior leading a horse was approaching him from behind, cutting off all possibility of retreat. He must go forward now at all hazards, crawling on his elbows inch by inch.

From where he was he could not tell that there might not be several savages instead of only one lurking behind the barrier ready to leap upon him. He thought of Mee-Mee waiting near with the two horses. Everything depended on his getting back to her as speedily as possible.

He listened, lying flat, with his finger on the trigger of his revolver. Yes, he could hear his waiting enemy breathing.

Something flashed in the grass barely a couple of yards beyond him. It was like the fitful light of a glow-worm, but Kiddie's sharp sight told him that it was the shining blade of a knife momentarily caught by the glint of the fires. He waited, watching for its reappearance. He knew now that the Red-skin was lying there ready to plunge that knife into him as he passed.

With extraordinary agility, and making as little sound as a snake might have made, Kiddie gathered himself together, with his feet under him, his knees bent to make a great leap forward, trusting by the suddenness of his movement to avoid at least a fatal blow. He hesitated a moment, trying to discover exactly the position of his hidden enemy, so that he might know from which side to expect the attack.

Again he heard the lurking Redskin breathing wheezily just beyond a jutting corner of rock, and again he saw the flash of the waiting blade. Then there came to him the sound of quick, light footsteps, the Redskin's exclamation of alarm, followed by a sharp, heavy blow and a cry that was half a snarl of anger, half a groan of pain. There was a second, yet fiercer blow. Kiddie sprang forward now, in time to see Mec-Mee crouching over the bare, shiny body of the Indian scout.

"Come, Kiddie, come!" she cried, seeing him emerge from the passage between the rocks. And she ran back to the place where she had left the two horses, Kiddie following at her heels.

They both mounted, and rode away at a cautious walking pace.

Kiddie had learned very little; but at least he had seen the Sioux encampment, and had been able roughly to estimate the number of braves in the band; he had also discovered a way by which the rescue party might approach, and, having thus far fulfilled his mission, he wished to make his report to Buckskin Jack at the earliest possible moment.

"Quick, Mec-Mee!" he urged, assuring himself that they were not followed. And they broke into a steady gallop in the direction of White Bull Ridge.

Once they were challenged by a savage, who suddenly rose

in front of them from a clump of cactus bush ; but their head-gear, and blankets, and the way they rode their ponies, barebacked and with halters, instead of with bridle reins, disguised them so completely as to deceive the Indian, who did not further molest them. They went on and on, until they had passed well beyond the zone of the Sioux' outposts, when they quickened their pace to racing speed, now sweeping through the long grass of the level plain, now mounting to rocky heights, now dashing through narrow passes, and along deep defiles. There was not a furlong of the way that was not known to Kiddie of Birkenshaw's, and within an hour's time he was at the appointed rendezvous.

The horsemen moved among the sheltering trees like silent shadows. Their two scouts, Hoskin and Burrelle, had come in and given their reports to the leader. They had each separately and from different approaches located the Sioux village and made a rough count of the number of lodges ; but neither had succeeded in getting very close. Indeed, they agreed that it would not be possible for a large party of horsemen to take the Indians by surprise, entering the village by stealth, unseen and unsuspected. The method they urged was that of a sudden, quick advance across the level ground and a combined charge.

Buck shook his head in rejection of this advice.

"We've got to rescue those girls," he said, "and that can only be done by cunning. Where's the half-breed—Kiddie of Birkenshaw's ? Ain't he come in yet ? I hope he hasn't fallen foul of the Redskin scouts ! I'm not sure that I ought to have trusted him."

At that moment Kiddie and Mee-Mee rode up to him. Buckskin Jack was enraged that the girl should be there, and he opened his wrath upon Kiddie for allowing her to accompany him.

"She ain't been useless," protested Kiddie ; "she's helped some." And then he proceeded to make his report. He told Buck about the finding of Liza Westrop's footmarks, and of his following on the trail of the band that had taken the two girls captive. Then he described exactly the lie of the land about the Indian village, and suggested how best the boys

might secretly approach the lodges. He gave a more exact estimate of the enemy's strength than either Hoskin or Burrelle had given.

Buck listened to him with close attention, and questioned him searchingly.

"Gideon Birkenshaw sized you up pretty well when he told me you were good at tracking," he said at last.

"Rube Carter's squaw did more than I did, though," Kiddie protested. "It was the squaw found out that Liza and Jess were prisoners, and I reckon she saved my life when that scout was ready to take it. She's hankering hard to go back with me, and locate the teepee where the Westrop girls are, and the lodge of Eye-of-the-Moon. I calculate you intend to rescue the girls before anything else."

"Why, certainly," Buck nodded, "if we can only find them. The squaw might do considerable service, I'll allow; but I am not going to send her into any danger. She has no business to be here, yet she can't go home alone now. I guess she'll just have to come along with us, and help mind our ponies if we dismount."

The last of Buck's plainsmen had now arrived, and, all being ready, he told them his plans, and directed Kiddie to act as principal guide. The men fell into single file in three detachments, and they rode off at a quick trot in the direction by which Kiddie and Mee-Mee had just come.

For a long part of the distance it seemed that they were not observed; but just as they came within view of the fitful glow from the Indians' fires one of the Sioux' outposts dashed across their path, riding furiously in the direction of the encampment, evidently with the purpose of giving the alarm of an enemy's approach.

At sight of him Buck gave chase, calling upon Hoskin and Lal Putnam to join him. The Indian instantly flung himself along the off-side of his pony, and began to fire backward with a repeating rifle. Hoskin's pony was hit on the knee and stumbled, throwing her rider. Jake Paterson took his place. Buck plunged forward, quickly overhauling the Indian, and coming neck and neck with him. For a few moments there was a running duel; but suddenly the Sioux

flung up his arms and fell over his broncho's haunch, receiving a heel kick that surely stunned, if it did not kill, him.

Without looking at the fallen brave, Buck returned to the head of the file he was leading, calling to Kiddie to put on pace.

Kiddie did so, and, after a sharp ride, brought up near the barrier of rocks where Mee-Mee's victim still lay, as yet undiscovered by his people.

Here the scouts dismounted. They were to advance cautiously and separately as near as they could approach to the Indians' lodges, to discover an easy point of attack; but, more than all, they were, if possible, to find out in what part of the village the two Westrop girls were held captive.

Jake Paterson volunteered to act with them. Mee-Mee also made an effort to accompany them, and she would have stolen off had not Abe Harum forcibly restrained her. Abe himself would have gone, too, for he was recognised as an excellent tracker; but his wounded fingers made it impossible for him to crawl on hands and knees, as he would have to do.

There were two other ways round about the rocks, but Kiddie led his fellow scouts in by the gap. There they waited for a space, surveying from afar the fires by whose light the Sioux were still engaged in their barbaric scalp dance to the music of chanting voices and beating drums. Then Kiddie indicated by signs to his companions how they were to go, and how return, and they dispersed in couples, Kiddie and Jake being together.

The Sioux were not keeping vigilant watch, it seemed, and even the distant report of their scout's rifle fire had not greatly disturbed them. Nevertheless, there were many of their number who were taking no active share in the rejoicings, and who might at any moment wander far enough apart from the lodges to discover the near presence of an enemy.

Kiddie was well versed in the lore of Indian custom, and he well understood why some of the braves did not participate in the scalp dance. Five separate companies had gone out horse raiding on the previous night, and only those who had returned victorious, without the loss of any of their





Suddenly he seized Kiddie's arm as he caught sight of a huge black form.

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number, were privileged to join in the dance of victory. The others, who were less fortunate, had painted their faces black and mutilated themselves in mourning for their fallen brethren. A warrior had been killed at Westrop's ranch ; consequently, the survivors of this band and their girl prisoners must be sought for among the tents of the mourners, and it was these that Kiddie desired most anxiously to discover.

He moved over the grass and among the bushes with cat-like softness, until he came into the midst of a troop of horses, when he stood up, and, closely followed by Jake Paterson, made his way quickly among them. Nearer and nearer he drew, until he could have counted the feathers in each dancing, gesticulating savage's bonnet. The lodges were pitched in separate groups in a long, double row, with a wide, open lane running between from end to end, lighted up at intervals by the fires.

The two scouts slowly worked their way into the dark shadows at the rear, where the Indians' dogs prowled or lay sleeping, preventing a near approach. Jake soon began to despair of finding his sweetheart in this unapproachable village.

"We're only wasting time, hanging around here," he whispered impatiently. "Let's get back to the boys right now, and begin the attack."

"Wait!" cautioned Kiddie. He turned silently, and gazed back into the darkness. "Say, I've a notion we're being tracked by one of their dogs," he added. "I've heard the beast for a while past sniffing, and grunting, and panting at our heels."

Jake followed his glance, and suddenly he seized Kiddie's arm as he caught sight of a huge black form, from whose bent head a pair of gleaming eyes shone forth.

"It's a dog, sure," he muttered, gripping his knife in preparation for the struggle. "Guess I'll soon settle the brute."

The dog moved nearer to him, with muzzle to the ground, then stopped, lifting its head. Jake made sure the animal was about to leap at his throat, and he raised his knife to strike. But, instead of attacking him, the dog uttered a low

whine of recognition, and began to sniff about him inquiringly, slashing the grass with a heavy tail.

"He knows me, sure," said Jake. "'Tain't a Injun dog. Blister me if it ain't old Druid—Jess Westrop's blood-hound!"

"Then I calculate he's on the trail of his mistress," declared Kiddie with conviction, "and all we've got to do is just to follow on his track. He'll lead us to where she is, sure as a gun!"

CHAPTER IX

DESPERATE WORK

JAKE caught at the hound's collar, from which there hung about a foot length of chain.

"He's been chained up, and has broken away," he whispered. And he loosened the coloured handkerchief that was about his own neck, and tied a corner of it to the ring of the dog's collar.

"Seek her, then, Druid! Seek her!" he urged; and the hound again lowered his muzzle and made off in a determined line, the two scouts following him.

The dogs of the Indians had already set up an unearthly howling, and occasionally one would come out into the open to investigate and continue its challenge at closer quarters.

"You've come far enough, now, Jake," said Kiddie. "Let me take the dog while you run back and report all you know. Tell Buckskin Jack to make a charge right down the middle lane of the village, as far as the third fire, and then to look out for the girls."

Jake yielded the leash to him, and quickly disappeared. Druid dashed off again, dragging Kiddie after him, and at length came into the very midst of the lodges. Kiddie, indeed, had all he could do to keep the hound from pulling him into the full glare of the firelight. It was too soon to risk discovery. He must lie low until help was near at hand. Druid's persistent pulling in one settled direction, however, indicated that he was on the trail of his mistress. Kiddie observed, too, with satisfaction that the hound was tracking towards a group of wigwams in front of which the Redskins were sending up yells and groans of lamentation.

"Good lad, Druid." he said soothingly, stroking the

hound's wrinkled forehead, and long, pendulous ears. "Not yet, though."

He drew Druid into the darker shadows, and held him with iron grip ; but the hound strained at his collar, dragging him inch by inch towards a particular lodge, whose buffalo-skin cover showed a flare of light through its gaping seams and smoke hole. Kiddie dug his heels into the earth, and held the eager animal back.

While he did so, he sniffed again and again inquisitively. Amid the resinous smell of wood smoke he fancied that he detected, or were his nostrils so acute that he actually did inhale, the same pungent sweet perfume that had clung to the fragment of lace-edged cambric he had picked up on the trail ? He went nearer. Yes, it was the same perfume without a doubt !

"Guess you've located those girls," he said ; "but you've just got to wait."

The wigwam was within twenty yards of him. He could see that its entrance was crowded about by braves and squaws, who were wailing noisily, while they appeared to be taking a lively interest in what was within the tent. Once he heard a stifled scream. The voice was different from the voices of the Indians.

"That's one of the Westrop girls," Kiddie muttered to himself. "I wish Jake would bring the boys along right now !"

Jake Paterson did not tarry. He was even reckless in his haste to join his waiting comrades from the ranches ; so reckless that the Indian pickets perceived him as he ran. Before he reached Buck's side and panted out his information, the alarm had been given, and the Sioux were dashing out their camp fires and arming themselves to repel the expected attack.

Jake found his pony and leapt to the saddle.

"This way ! " he cried. "The gals are in the middle of the village."

Buck sent a small party of his men to cut off the retreat of the Redskins on either flank, but reserved the larger number to charge through the main avenue of lodges.

The drumming of their galloping horses' feet, and the firing of their rifles and pistols, soon reached Kiddie's ears. This was the moment he was waiting for, and now he loosened his hold of the bloodhound. Druid gave tongue, and made a bound for the nearest wigwam, circling about it for a moment or two, sniffing the ground.

Kiddie followed with his pistols ready. He saw the hound disappear in the opening, and heard the excited cry of welcome with which one of the girls greeted him. There was a rush of warriors into the lodge, but they had not crossed the threshold when the hound turned upon them with the ferocity of an enraged tiger. One of them fell with the hound at his throat, the others made a precipitate retreat, and Kiddie, seeing his opportunity, slipped into the wigwam.

"Liza ! Jess !" he cried.

The two girls drew back from him, not knowing him in his disguise.

"Don't be scared," he implored them. "I'm Birkenshaw's Kiddie. Jake Paterson'll be here before long with a posse of the boys. Quick, they're coming right now ! Don't you hear them ? Make the dog bark, so they'll know where you are ! "

Jess seized the hound's collar, and held him between herself and her sister, while the squaw who was their fellow captive, stood behind. Druid whined piteously.

Kiddie then took up a position at the entrance, ready to shoot down any Redskin who should dare to approach. But the Sioux were too much alarmed for their own safety to pay regard to their prisoners. They scattered in all directions, while Buckskin Jack and his gang of frontiersmen swept nearer and nearer like a devastating wave, discharging their bullets to right and left. In advance of them rode Jake Paterson, searching for signs of Kiddie and the bloodhound. He had emptied his two revolvers, and now carried his repeating rifle in front of him, reserving his fire. Mee-Mee rode behind him, leading Kiddie's horse. Jake drew rein, hearing the hound's bark, so different from the wild, wolf-like howl of the Indians' flea-bitten curs.

"Jake !" cried Kiddie. "This way, Jake ! "

Jake saw him now indistinctly in the firelight, standing on guard in front of Liza and Jess Winthrop, and he rode towards them, fighting his way through a crowd of savages, who sought to keep possession of their prisoners. Before Jake had dismounted, a dozen of the boys were with him, each clamouring for the coveted honour of being the actual rescuer.

"Say, Jess, you climb up here alongside o' me, and I'll take you home right away!" called out Lal Putnam.

"Here's my pony for you, Liza," shouted Abe Harum. "And maybe you'll find a gun useful as well!"

Buckskin Jack deputed Isa Blagg to take command of the rescue party, and, calling off the rest, continued his destructive way through the encampment. He rode through the lane of lodges with the dash of a cavalry officer leading his troopers to a desperate charge, firing with deadly aim at every Redskin who ventured to show himself in his path.

Taken wholly by surprise, by a force of which they did not know the full strength, the Sioux were not prepared to offer a planned resistance. Some were, indeed, armed with clubs and tomahawks and knives, and some few with shot-guns, and these moved boldly to the encounter; but for the most part the Indians escaped in panic to their horses.

This was just what Buck had expected that they would do, and it was for this reason that he had despatched his reserve men to positions where they might cut off the retreat. The attack was as sharp as it was unexpected, and the boys from the various ranches were too deeply intent upon revenge, too fierce in their hatred of the red men, to allow many to escape. They showed no mercy, and some would even have gone the length of taking the scalps of their fallen foes, but that their leader had given strict orders against the committing of such barbarity.

None of the white men were more recklessly revengeful than Buck himself. At the end of the village he halted for his men to rejoin him, and then, rallying them together, he charged again in the reverse direction. But by this time the moon had broken through the mist, and by its light it could be seen that most of the Sioux had disappeared, only the more

courageous of them lingering to pull down and hastily pack their teepees, or to snatch up some treasured possessions and make off with them. They crept away stealthily, silently, and even their women and children escaped by unseen ways. Yet, notwithstanding their haste, they contrived to round up and drive before them the greater number of their horses.

It was with the hope of regaining possession of their stolen ponies, as much as with the desire for vengeance upon the marauding Indians, that many of the frontiersmen had joined in this raid, and when Buckskin Jack came to gather his forces together for a final planned pursuit, he was alarmed to find that many of his fellows had already broken off into small independent companies, and were even now racing recklessly after the escaping Sioux, heedless of their own danger in thus distributing their strength. But they had had a partial victory, and in their elation they were wildly eager to follow it up by giving chase to the scattered fugitives, and shooting them down without mercy or exception.

"Have any of you boys caught sight of the chief?" Buck inquired of the two or three men who still rode beside him.

"Seems to me they ain't got no chief," declared Hoskin, winding his scarf about a wounded arm. "If old Eye-of-the-Moon or Spotted Tail had been anyways near, you may bet your eyes they'd have made a stronger stand against us than they have done. I reckon a good half of 'em are off on the war-path somewhere else. There don't appear to have been nearly as big a band of 'em as that young half-breed from Birkenshaw's made out."

"Well," decided Buck, "so long as we have saved the two girls from their clutches, we may be satisfied. Eye-of-the-Moon can wait. I guess we've done enough damage for one journey. Come, we'd best get along to Isa Blagg."

The sheriff and his party, with the rescued girls, had not gone far on their way—indeed, they had hardly passed beyond the gap in the rocks—when Buck overtook them, greatly to their relief, for they were not yet beyond danger. From far behind and around them they could hear sounds like the humming of an angry swarm of bees disturbed from their hive, and the intermittent crackle of rifle and pistol

came to them, mingled with the yells of Indians and the shouts of the pursuing ranchmen.

"Say, Buck, why in thunder are those boys lagging behind?" Isa questioned anxiously. "We shall need them here. They ought to have kept together, anyhow. I thought they'd more sense. They'll lose their scalps, that's sure, if they ain't mighty careful. Kiddie here makes out that there's a whole heap of Redskins in ambush along there at the bend of the creek."

"That's so," added Kiddie. "They're making ready to attack us in the open, and I reckon we shall need every man and gun we can get."

He turned to Buck. The moonlight shone in his face. He had wiped the paint from his checks, and thrown away his feathered head-dress, and he sat astride of a saddled and bridled pony, the mustang he had previously ridden having been claimed by Abe Harum, who had joined in the pursuit of the retreating braves.

The party, including Liza and Jess Westrop, Mee-Mee, and the Westrops' squaw woman, numbered but fifteen persons, and, although they were all well mounted and well armed, their position was not without serious peril.

"I presume you intend to escort the two young ladies right back to their home?" suggested the sheriff.

Buck nodded.

"Why, certainly," he agreed. "That's where they want to go, sure. Kiddie here will take us by the shortest way."

"Not that the shortest way is the safest," Kiddie ventured to demur. "We'd better by far get on to the old trail by way of One Tree Gulch."

"Gee!" exclaimed Blagg. "That's a good two hours longer than by Slade's Ford, and our ponies are most played out already!"

Buck and Isa discussed the situation, and finally it was decided to take the shorter way—the way by which the Indians had brought their captives, and by which, for some distance, Kiddie and Mee-Mee had approached the encampment.

Kiddie rode on in advance at an easy trot along the valley.

Now that the excitement of the rescue was over, he realised that he was exceedingly hungry, that his throat and tongue were parched with thirst, and that he was very weary ; so weary that he could even have fallen asleep in his saddle, and would have allowed himself to do so had he not been riding a strange horse, and had he not had the responsibility of leading the way. With difficulty he kept himself awake, forcing himself to constant watchfulness.

The moon was at the full, and every tree and bush, every knoll, and mound, and tuft of herbage that broke the level of the grassy plain that he was crossing could be seen as clearly as by daylight. It was the necessity of traversing this exposed stretch of open prairie land connecting two ranges of foot-hills which had urged him to recommend a return by the more sheltered trail, which would have afforded ample ambush in the event of a surprise. And, sure enough, his caution was justified.

Suddenly, when he had gone barely a couple of miles, he drew rein ; his pony came to a halt. The bloodhound, which had been following him closely, also stood still, sniffing the night air with quivering nostrils.

Kiddie's eyes were now roving from point to point of a dark, encircling line that indicated a dip in the land between him and the yet darker shadows of the trees that bordered the river towards which he was journeying, and his ears were alertly listening. Buckskin Jack called a halt, and Isa Blagg rode slowly forward.

"Do you see, sheriff ? Do you hear ?" questioned Kiddie.

"See ? Hear ?" repeated Isa wonderingly.

Kiddie pointed quickly to right, to left, in front of him. And then the sheriff made out a row of swiftly moving objects, that in the uncertain light looked like a school of playful prairie dogs gambolling about their burrows. But as he watched he saw what Kiddie had seen, that these were a band of Indian horsemen, whose heads and shoulders only were visible beyond the ridge that obscured their bodies, and the bodies of their galloping horses.

"Snakes alive !" muttered the sheriff. "They've got us, sure !"

Hardly had Kiddie and he got back to their companions when it was seen that the Indians, to the number of a full half hundred, were sweeping round them, enclosing them in a rapidly narrowing circle. With a cry that was like the shrieking of the March wind the savages revealed themselves.

Buckskin Jack looked at the sheriff, and then at Kiddie.

"You were right, Kiddie," he murmured. "We ought to have gone the other way."

He drew a deep breath, realising the menacing horror of the situation. Flight was useless; resistance promised hardly more success. Surrender meant certain death and mutilation. What was to be done?

The situation was certainly as desperate as it well could be; but Buckskin Jack betrayed no agitation. Cool and self-contained, he measured his chances at a glance, and had resolved upon a method of defence before the yelling Redskins had come within range.

The only natural protection which the ground afforded was an old buffalo wallow, which formed a shallow, cup-like depression in the otherwise level surface of grass. Buck called to the four women to dismount and take advantage of this slight shelter, and, without question, they obeyed, gathering together in a close group in the middle of the hollow, while he and his men formed a ring about them, bringing the horses side by side in a compact circle, with their hindquarters towards the enemy.

"Now, shoot the ponies, boys!" commanded Buck. "It's our only chance. Aim true. Don't waste a shot! And, remember—rifles at long range, revolvers for close quarters, knives at the last."

It was a cruel expedient, but one that was familiar enough to the men of the plains, and frequently put into practice on occasions such as the present, when death at the hands of a savage and relentless foe stared them in the face.

The boys dismounted and did their gruesome work, and in less than five minutes they all lay with their hands to their guns, looking grimly over the barricade of still-palpitating horse flesh, while the Indians, galloping furiously, and shrieking aloud their thrilling war whoops, drew slowly nearer

and nearer like an advancing tide. At first their circle was a very wide one, the riders being forty or fifty yards apart from each other; but gradually they drew inward in a diminishing belt. They were evidently in no haste to come within range. They seemed, indeed, as if they were taking a fiendish delight in prolonging the mental torture of their victims.

This delay, nevertheless, gave the whites all the more time in which to strengthen their defences. While the men waited and watched, ready to open fire, the four women strove to increase the height of their barricade by scraping a deeper hollow in the soft ground with knives and hands, and piling the loose soil upon the sides of their dead and dying horses.

"I just reckon I could draw a bead on one of 'em now," said Kiddie, who lay next to Buck, with his gun at his shoulder. He was counting the Sioux as their dark forms flashed across the path of moonlight, upon which his eyes were fixed. One of them was mounted upon a peculiarly marked piebald broncho, and, taking this as the first, he had numbered forty-seven before it came round again. "Guess I could touch one now."

"You can have a try," nodded Buck. "At least you will find the range."

The defenders lay with their rifles pointing outward, and each understood that his aim was to be directed upon the Redskins who happened to be riding directly opposite to him at the moment. Kiddie glanced along the shining barrel of his rifle, waiting until a conspicuous mark crossed the field of his vision. He fired, and the spitting, whip-like crack of his Winchester was answered by a savage, mocking war whoop.

"Say, you got that one in, anyway," commented Buckskin Jack, as one of the braves swayed in his seat and slipped to the ground, to be dragged along by the trailing lariat, to which he clung.

"Look out, boys!" cried the sheriff. "This ain't goin' to be no picnic, you bet! Lie low there, you gels."

There was a flash from amid the ring of riders, and something like a "buz-z" of a mosquito passed by the sheriff's left

ear. With one accord the Redskins turned their horses inward, and two or three bullets kicked up puffs of dirt wide of the barricade. These were followed by a hail of arrows, that sang through the air and pattered harmless in the dust many yards away.

"Steady all!" cautioned Buck. "Take your time."

As he spoke the Indians came on with a whirl of yells, and the grass-muffled drumming of many hoofs.

"Now, fire away!" Buck commanded, himself settling to work.

Each of the defenders picked out his particular mark in the advancing throng. There was a cracking fusillade of rifle fire, and when the smoke lifted a dozen riderless ponies ran wild and lost in the moonlight.

"Steady!" cried Buck.

Dismayed at their reception, the Sioux had wheeled, and were now riding back out of range, leaving many of their number stretched upon the plain.

Buckskin Jack gave a sigh of relief.

"Anyone hurt?" He looked round anxiously to inquire.

"Never a one," answered Jake Paterson, who, nevertheless, was wiping a trickle of dark blood from his cheek, where an arrow's feather had cut a deep score.

"Their arrows most fell short," said Kiddie, "and they've not got many rifles, even if they knew how to use them."

"Ready again, boys," Buck commanded. "They'll soon be back." He opened his gun, and forced cartridges into the magazine until it could hold no more. The boys also loaded up, and even Mee-Mee crawled out from the hollow and took up a position at the side of the barricade, where she lay with a loaded revolver in each hand.

"Here they come!" muttered the sheriff, after a long interval of silent waiting.

The Indians were again circling round and round, hanging to the off sides of their steeds, and drawing nearer and nearer, until they should come within easy bowshot. Then, again, they opened fire from under their ponies' necks. This time their arrows pattered upon the barricade in a heavy shower that lasted for many moments. But the besieged ranchmen

kept up a return fire, dropping pony after pony, and occasionally a rider. Some of the red men who had lost their mounts crawled closer on hands and knees, and one, more daring than the rest, showed his feathered head above the barrier, with his gleaming scalping knife between his teeth. He raised himself, and Mec-Mee saw his right hand go up to the quiver of arrows above his left shoulder. Quicker than he, she drew the trigger of her nearer revolver, and he fell back with a bullet between his eyes, while his scalping knife slid down to her knees.

Another crept up to where Hoskin was stationed. Hoskin drew back as the black shape of a tomahawk came between him and the moon, but not in time to avoid the blow that was aimed at the exposed crown of his head. He rolled over in a heap, and the bloodhound scrambled across him, with a fierce, deep-throated growl, to seize the venturesome Redskin by the throat.

“Pistols, boys, pistols!” cried Buck, as the Sioux came nearer still. And, if the savages supposed that they had drawn the whole fire of their victims, and that they could now claim their scalps, they discovered their error when it was a question of facing a ring of deadly revolvers. As a shower of well-aimed bullets met them, the charging riders wavered and broke for cover, a diminished company, disappearing into the far-off shadows of the cotton trees, leaving the plain bestrewn with moaning horses and dead or dying braves.

“I reckon Hoskin’s just about done for,” reported Jake Paterson, going the round of his companions. “And Burrelle’s hit bad.”

“So’m I,” said the sheriff, coolly drawing an arrow from his shoulder. “How is that, Kiddie—poisoned?”

Kiddie took the weapon, and critically scrutinised its barbed point by the light of the moon.

“No,” he answered decisively. “Tain’t poisoned.”

There was a long breathing spell, during which Liza and Jess Westrop busied themselves in attending to the wounded.

“If we hadn’t done such a fool thing as to shoot our ponies, we could have rid away right now,” regretted Jake, peering out across the plain to the distant hills in the north-west,

where his home ranch lay in a sheltered nook beside the babbling Sweetwater. "There ain't no Injuns over there, I guess."

"If we hadn't shot our ponies, I calculate we should have been wiped clean out of this here existence a good hour ago," retorted Isa Blagg. "And, if you've got any kind of doubt about that, just take a squint along the outside of the barrier, and see what the hosses have saved us from! Why, there ain't a carcase of them that's not like a pin-cushion."

In the silence and stillness of that time of waiting a filmy cloud had drifted across the moon, and in the darkness Kiddie turned himself over with his head on his folded arms. He breathed deeply, and presently all consciousness of his weird surroundings faded from his mind.

Buckskin Jack glanced down at him, and then quietly stretched out his hand and drew a saddle cloth towards him, opened it out, and softly spread it over Kiddie's body and legs.

"Poor little chap," he muttered softly. "He has had a jolly hard day of it. Let him sleep."

"Say, are we goin' to lie about here all night, then?" inquired Jake Paterson. "Ain't we goin' to clear out of this while it's dark?"

Buck did not answer. He had dimly caught sight of Mee-Mee leaning forward over the barricade, and looking searchingly out in the direction of the trees.

A light breeze from the same quarter stirred her loose black hair, and the two tall feathers of her Indian head-dress swayed and fluttered. Presently, as he intently watched her, he saw her take up a rifle and lay it across her arm. He crept up behind her, wondering; but ere he could discover what it was that had aroused her vigilance, she lifted the weapon to her shoulder, and a shot rang out sharply in the night air. Buck touched her, but, without heeding him, she shifted her aim by a few points, and again pulled the trigger. This time, however, there was no flash. The cartridges were all spent. She impatiently dropped the rifle and looked round, searching for another, but could find none in the darkness.

"Kiddie! Kiddie!" she called.





The Indians were firing the prairie.

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Kiddie was already on his feet, disturbed by Buck's movement from his side, and further awakened by the sound of the squaw's shot. He crossed to where Mee-Mee stood, carrying his Winchester with him.

"Ain't they all gone, then?" he inquired, leaning over the barrier.

Mee-Mee turned to him quickly.

"You no see? You no smell?" she demanded, pointing outward. And then, following the direction indicated, both Buck and Kiddie, as well as those who now crowded behind them, saw what she had seen, and understood.

They saw a broken line of dark, crouching figures, and against each figure there was a waving column of smoke rising from amid tiny flickering flames. The Indians were firing the prairie.

As if by magic, the fires spread, and joined into one long line. The wind caught and swept them down towards the besieged ranchmen in a crackling mass of dancing flames and flying sparks, and pungent, stinging smoke.

"Quick! For your lives!" commanded Buck.

"Too late!" cried Kiddie; "we're surrounded."

A wild, exultant yell from behind gave proof of his declaration. Round and round again the vengeful Redskins were wheeling in a rapidly lessening ring. Again, as they rode, their arrow shafts twanged off the bowstring, sang through the air, and pattered like hail against the barrier, over which few fell.

"Give it 'em, boys!" shouted Isa Blagg. But the others had already set to work.

"Steady!" cried Buck. "Aim true, and don't forget to keep your last bullets for yourselves—and the girls."

The murmuring flames crept closer; their heat came like a pestilential breath, while wafts of black and blinding reek hid the enemy from sight, notwithstanding that the moon had again broken through the clouds. But volley after volley went through the smoke and blaze, and the yells that followed told that they were not wasted.

"Reckon the wind's shifting," murmured Kiddie. "It'll send the fire the other way."

Mee-Mee gripped his arm.

"Hark!" she said. "You hear?"

Kiddie listened, and above the crackle of burning grass and the constant racket of rifle and revolver, he could hear a sound which sent a thrill of gladness through him—the sound of the determined galloping of many horses, mingled with the jingle of accoutrements, which told unmistakably of cavalry.

"Yes, I hear," he nodded calmly. "It's the boys from Fort Hatcher, sure. I just guess old man Gideon pushed a message along by the Pony Express."

It was clear that the Indians also had heard that significant and, to them, less welcome sound. Away from the smoke, and in the bright moonlight, they could distinctly see the troop of cavalry approaching, as well as a band of frontiersmen, led by Abe Harum. They could also see a great herd of their captured horses being driven forward by the boys, who had rounded them up, and they knew well that their own safety lay only in precipitate flight.

Kiddie saw them gathering together in a bunch; but what attracted his attention more even than their retreat was the sight of the chief who seemed to be directing their movements—a chief who had newly joined them, mounted on a white horse and wearing a magnificent feathered head-dress.

He went up to Buckskin Jack and clutched excitedly at his arm.

"Say, do you see their chief?" he questioned. "That's Eye-of-the-Moon. Sure as sure it's Eye-of-the-Moon. He's wearing the war-bonnet that I took from him, and he's mounted on your white pony that we left in the corral."

"My pony for a certainty," nodded Buck. "There's no mistaking Snowdrop."

"I figure he's been along at Birkenshaw's," suggested Kiddie.

"Without a doubt," agreed Buck.

CHAPTER X

GEOFF SEVERN'S VISITOR

"No, Geoff, my boy, I'm afraid we shall have to give up our quest as a bad job," sighed Mr. Severn, leaning over the plank table and meditatively snuffing the candle wick between his finger and thumb.

"It certainly looks like it at present," assented his son, with a sleepy yawn. "It's no end of a nuisance, this poor chap Carter being killed and scalped by Indians just when he was wanted. But you ought at least to be satisfied that he wasn't the man we were searching for, and that the real Captain Fritton may still be alive."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"Alive he may be," he returned, "but where is he to be found? Even if he were living within a score of miles of this forsaken shanty there's no telling what name he is known by, and it's a thousand to one he's not anything like what we expect him to be in personal appearance. Carter could have told us. He knew him at home, before he came out here, and can't have lost sight of him."

Geoff stood up from the uncomfortable three-legged stool upon which he had been sitting.

"Have you examined those papers that Birkenshaw gave you?" he inquired—"the papers that he emptied out of the tin box?"

"Yes," Mr. Severn nodded. "They're no earthly use—a lot of accounts about cattle and horses, letters from his sister in London; no mention of the name of Fritton. Have a look at them if you like. They're on that shelf behind you."

The two were alone in Gideon Birkenshaw's living-room. Tom Lippincott was asleep in the little room beyond, and Gideon himself had gone down to the trail with a fresh pony

to await the arrival of the westward-going Express man, who was now due. Mr. Severn was finding these quarters extremely uncomfortable. He objected to roughing it, he objected to the coarse food and the coarse company; more than all he objected to passing a night in a dwelling which still bore visible traces of the sanguinary fight which had taken place in it only a few hours before. He was inclined almost to prefer the discomforts of the prairie waggon and a bed on the top of one of his cabin trunks.

He rose from the table and strode to the door, leaving Geoff to overhaul the various uninteresting documents, which he had himself found to be utterly useless. Presently he took out his silver-mounted cigar case, forgetting that it was empty.

"Geoff, I must go down to the waggon, after all, to get some cigars." He looked back into the room to say, "Thank goodness, it's moonlight."

As he went down the verandah steps and turned to take the path leading through the trees, he did not happen to notice a pair of glistening eyes watching him from among the bushes, or to hear the Indian grunt of satisfaction which followed his disappearance. He was as unconscious of the presence of a lurking Redskin as was his son, who was already busy examining Rube Carter's papers by the flickering candle-light.

Not that there was any serious danger in the Indian's presence at this particular moment. Eye-of-the-Moon had not come here to kill, or even with the deliberate intention of stealing. His scalping knife reposited in its sheath, his gun was hidden beside the gate-post of Birkenshaw's cabbage patch, and he was coveting no man's property but his own. From where he crouched, supported by his sinewy arms, he could see the thing that he wanted hanging up in a corner of the room beyond the pale-face boy who sat at the table in the candle-light. How his war-bonnet came to be there Eye-of-the-Moon did not ask himself. He knew this as little as he knew just how he had lost it, and on this latter point his mind was still blank as the pathless prairie on a night when there is no moon. He remembered only that he wore it

at the time when, at the prompting of discretion, he had retired from the hot conflict with his pale-face enemies, and taken cover among the friendly trees. As he ran, something had struck the back of his head, the trees had wheeled round like warriors in a scalp dance, and he remembered no more—remembered nothing until he found himself riding unsteadily on a strange horse, with a brave at each side of him holding him on, and with a vicious, throbbing pain at the swollen base of his skull.

Not until they were taking him into the village did he realise that he was returning to his people without his war-bonnet—his magnificent war-bonnet, each one of whose cherished plumes was a record of great achievement, representing a grand “coo” won in a successful horse raid or a glorious battle, or for taking the scalp of some redoubtable foe. Losing his war-bonnet, his insignia of chieftainship, he had lost his “medicine”; he was as a marshal without a baton; his warriors and braves would know him no more; even his squaws and papooses would look at him in disdain as at one who was disgraced and degraded, whose word was no longer worthy to be listened to in tribal pow-wow, and whose hand, once resistless in war, could no longer direct the way to victory. He who was rich in robes and horses would be rich no more. Some other warrior would be made chief and counsellor in his stead, and he must kill his best pony, break his pipe-stem, and blacken his face.

Eye-of-the-Moon was very sad as he came in sight of his great lodge, and the scorn of his people hurt him more than his wounds. For the rest of that day he shut himself up in his tent, and nursed a heavy heart. But when the sun was nearing its setting his spirits renewed their strength, his hopes revived, and he arose and went secretly out of the village, and rode unattended back to the place where his sorrow had come to him. Long time he searched in the darkness, near the spot where he had fallen unconscious, and now at last he had discovered what he sought, and his heart leapt with joy.

Slowly and stealthily he crept to the verandah, and looked within the open doorway. Apart from the pale-face youth

who sat at the table, there was no one there to oppose his entry ; but the candle-light glinted upon the shining silver mountings of a revolver within easy reach of the boy's hand, and Eye-of-the-Moon had the Redskin's caution. He watched and waited.

Suddenly the boy turned his face to the doorway and spoke. His face was like the face of a woman, beardless and gentle-eyed, and his voice was like the musical ripple of running water.

" I say, pater, there's a whole heap about Fritton here ! " he declared. Eye-of-the-Moon had no skill with the strange tongue of the pale-face, and he did not understand. He withdrew into the shadow, and waited a little longer. When he peeped into the room again the boy had his elbows on the table, and his head in his hands. Eye-of-the-Moon wondered if his head was sore, and he was sorry. His own head was aching terribly.

But Geoff Severn was only reading out of a copy-book, in which Rube Carter had begun to draft a statement concerning his knowledge of the missing Captain Fritton, and his attention was keen, for the statement was evidently important.

Rube had begun by writing a brief account of a certain battle in Northern India, and of how he himself, serving as a private, had been surrounded by Pathans in trying to save a position. He had been struck helpless from his horse and had given himself up for lost, when an officer had dashed to his side, and, at the peril of his own life, gallantly lifted him to his saddle, and fought until every Pathan lay dead, a valorous act for which he had afterwards been rewarded with the honour of the Victoria Cross. The officer was Captain Reginald Fritton.

Reading this account, Geoff thought of the scene which he had recently witnessed in One Tree Gulch. He wondered if Captain Fritton's bravery had been as great as the bravery of Buckskin Jack. The two incidents were very much alike ; the two men had done very much the same thing, the one for the sake of a comrade in arms, the other for the sake of an absolute stranger.

Geoff turned over a page, and read of how, for some private

reason, which Rube did not particularise, Captain Fritton had resigned his commission in the British Army, and of how he, Reuben Carter, had come out with him to the far west of America. Fritton had bought a ranch in a fertile valley by the Little Laramie River, and there they had toiled and hunted together, living as brothers almost, until an unfortunate misunderstanding had separated them, and Rube had migrated to the Sweetwater district of Wyoming, and at length become a rider in the Pony Express on the Great Salt Lake Trail.

Rube had been guarded in what he had written. He stated that Reginald Fritton had changed his name, but he reserved the information as to what name had been assumed. He indicated, however, that the missing Englishman had long ago abandoned his ranch on the Little Laramie.

Continuing his reading, Geoff came upon the words :

“ Her name was Pine Leaf, and she was the favourite daughter of the Sioux chief, Sintagalasca. I didn’t wonder a bit at the captain taking a liking to her. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and as sweet as she was lovely, and you wouldn’t have known she was a Sioux, except for the Indian dress. At first he took very little notice of her, knowing that there was a certain young warrior in the tribe who hankered after her, and wanted to make her his squaw ; but she followed Captain Fritton like a shadow, and it was plain she was ready to give her life for him, and, in spite of his rival, he married her, and she became quite like an English gentlewoman.”

Geoff Severn drew himself back and whistled.

“ Married her, eh ? ” he exclaimed. “ The heir to an English peerage marrying an Indian squaw ! That suggests legal complications ! ”

A slight sound beyond the table caused him to look up. Something white moved in the corner of the room. Someone had entered silently and unobserved.

“ Hello ! ” he cried in surprise. “ Where the dickens did you drop from ? Are you one of the Birkenshaw household ? ”

A tall, blanketed Indian stood with his back to him, coolly taking down from its peg the white-feathered head-dress

that Kiddie had hung there. Geoff was quietly interested in this specimen of the red man—the first that he had seen at such close quarters.

Eye-of-the-Moon seemed to know by instinct that the pale-face boy had not touched his revolver, and that there was, therefore, no danger.

“How!” he said, with the placidity peculiar to his race, and then he repeated the greeting, “How!”

He stood at his full majestic height in front of Geoff, while he proceeded to crown himself with his war-bonnet, allowing the front feathers to spread out like a fan framing his rugged face, and the feathered streamers to fall to his heels. His blanket slipped down to his waist, revealing a richly wrought shirt of truly barbaric grandeur, with a groundwork of vermillion flannel, on which was wrought an elaborate mosaic in many-coloured beads, and bars of porcupine quills. A silver moon glowed on his breast, and many ermine tails dangled from his shoulders and arms. He was a magnificent specimen of humanity.

“I say!” exclaimed Geoff Severn, in boyish admiration. “You do look ripping fine, togged out like that! I’ve been wondering who those feathers belonged to. I thought, perhaps, they were only kept here as a sort of trophy. Didn’t imagine they belonged to a real Indian. And I suppose you’re a chief, are you? You look like one.”

Eye-of-the-Moon moved to go. There was risk in lingering here, and he had a far ride home to his wigwam. But he still hesitated, while his hand went up to his breast in seeming search of something that was missing from his decorations. Then he spoke, leaning eagerly forward and pointing insistently to his breast.

Geoff did not understand a word of the Sioux language.

“I suppose you want something to drink,” he said—“firewater, perhaps? I’m sorry I can’t offer you any.”

“Wugh!” grunted the chief, equally ignorant of what was being said to him, and then he began to talk volubly, making a sign on the palm of his hand which was meant to describe the Victoria Cross which he had lost.

“Eye-of-the-Moon is heavy of heart,” he said, in his own

tongue. "He is weak. The medicine that he wore at his breast has been taken from him. He believes it is here in the wigwam of the pale-face. It is no good for the pale-face to wear. For him it is bad medicine, and will bring him much evil. But for Eye-of-the-Moon it was powerful medicine. It made him a big warrior and a man. For many winters he has worn it over his heart. To him it was worth more than he can tell, guarding him from his enemies, making him powerful in war, rich in buffalo robes and ponies and scalps. It is lost to him, and he is as a woman. He cannot go on the war-path without it. But his brother, the pale-face boy, knows where it is, and he will say. He is of the race that have not crooked tongues. It is only cowards who lie, who have forked tongues, and he is not a coward. Speak deep from the heart, my brother, and tell me where my medicine may be found."

Geoff Severn shook his head in perplexity.

"Suppose you have a try at Greek," he suggested, "or Latin, or even French. I might understand you a bit, then. Or, if it isn't important, take a seat, and wait until someone who understands your outlandish lingo comes in—Mr. Birkenshaw, or the half-breed named Kiddie, or Buckskin Jack!"

"Buckskin Jack!" Whatever else he didn't know, Eye-of-the-Moon evidently knew this name. It seemed even to have power to inspire him with fear or dread. At sound of it he clapped his hand to his mouth, and made for the door, as silently as he had entered; and in a moment he was gone.

"I wonder if I ought to have let him take away that feathered head-dress?" Geoff questioned. "I should rather have liked to have it myself to take home to England as a trophy."

Some minutes later, when Gideon Birkenshaw was stabling the tired Express pony that had just come off its long journey from Three Crossings, he was startled at hearing the clatter of hoofs. He ran out, instinctively drawing his revolver. What he saw was an Indian chief riding away in hot haste on Buckskin Jack's favourite white pony. Gideon fired a shot

after him, but the chief only yelled a mocking whoop. Snow-drop was accustomed to the feel of an Indian's knees against her sides, and she galloped on and on over the moonlit plains and through the darksome cañons, galloping as if a thousand fiends were at her heels. Nor did she slacken pace until she came into the midst of the reek of the prairie fire.

"I figure he's been along at Birkenshaw's," said Kiddie.

"Without a doubt," agreed Buck.

CHAPTER XI

GRIZZLY NOTCH

“Good morning, Kiddie. You’re up early. I was flatterying myself that I was out of doors before anyone else, and here are you looking as if you had been up for ages ! ”

Kiddie nodded a silent response to Geoff Severn’s greeting, and went on with his work of fixing a fly to the line of his home-made fishing rod.

“I haven’t been up more’n about an hour,” he said, gripping both rod and line and rising from the upturned bucket on which he had been sitting—“time enough to water the ponies and let out the chucks, that’s all. After yesterday and last night I was kind of done up, and I overslept myself. But I’m not the only one that’s up before you. Mee-Mee’s back of the shanty milkin’ the cows. Say,” he asked abruptly, “at what o’clock might you and Mr. Severn be countin’ on havin’ your breakfast ? D’you reckon I’ve got time to slip down to the river for a trout or two ‘fore you’re ready ? ”

Geoff buttoned his jacket. The early morning air was colder than he had expected it to be.

“That depends on a lot of things,” he smiled, “such as the distance to the river, the abundance or scarcity of the fish in it, and your skill in catching them. But, if we are to wait until you have landed a trout with the amateurish-looking implement you’re now fiddling with, I should say we may expect breakfast at the fashionable hour of eleven o’clock.”

Kiddie’s brows twitched in a half-frown. There was something disconcerting in the mental alertness of this youth, with his superior air, and his public school cocksureness, and Kiddie was now remembering that it was to him that he

owed the loss of Eye-of-the-Moon's war-bonnet. But he suppressed his feelings of annoyance, and rejoined with his customary placidity :

"The river's hardly more'n a bowshot from here. Haven't you seen it ? Don't you hear the tune of it ? As for my fishing wand," he added, taking the fly hook between his fingers, "I allow 'tain't just a dandy, but I notion the Sweet-water trout would turn tail and quit if I was to use any other. They're kind of accustomed to it, see ? "

"I have a lovely new one in the waggon," Geoff announced with schoolboy pride. "Do you mind my getting it and coming with you ? "

"I should be real pleased," Kiddie agreed, striding towards the path that led down to the trail.

"You don't seem to be any the worse for your adventure last night," Geoff remarked, by way of opening a conversation. "But I suppose, after all, you didn't come across any Indians. There wasn't any fighting, was there ? "

"Just some," returned Kiddie laconically.

"Anybody hurt ? " resumed Geoff. "I was sound asleep when you came home, and didn't hear anything."

"Well," said Kiddie, "the sheriff got a considerable hole in his shoulder, Darwin Johnson lost two fingers, Wal Hoskin had a rifle bullet through his cheek, and Joe Burrelle and seven others of the boys were killed outright. So far's I know, that's about the lot."

"You take it exceedingly coolly, I must say," exclaimed Geoff. "Eight men killed outright ! Why, it must have been a regular pitched battle ! "

Kiddie glanced aside at him.

"Say, you didn't notion we'd gone away on a pleasure picnic, did you ? " he asked. "We lost eight good men, yes ; and would have lost considerably more if it hadn't been for Buckskin Jack and the boys from Fort Hatcher. But Abe Harum tells me he counted thirty-six dead Injuns in the village after the first charge, and there were nineteen round about the buffalo wallow, where we were entrenched ; so I figure we came out on top, anyway."

"Did you kill any of them yourself ? " Geoff asked.

"Guess I did," returned Kiddie.

"The fight must have been going on while the Indian chief was here at Birkenshaw's," conjectured Geoff. "Perhaps if he had been with his people it would have made a difference."

"That's likely," admitted Kiddie. "I guess we should all have been rubbed out. Eye-of-the-Moon is reckoned a boss general among the Injuns. I'm told you entertained him for a while, and that you allowed him to carry away the warbonnet."

"I couldn't very well prevent him doing that," said Geoff.

"Dare say not," nodded Kiddie. "I'm sorry, all the same. He didn't take anything else, did he—except Buck's pony?"

"No, but there was something that he seemed very much to want. He jabbered away like one o'clock, pointing to his breast all the time."

"Is that so?" Kiddie permitted his lips to assume the nearest resemblance to a smile that Geoff had yet seen upon them. But he did not consider it necessary to give expression to his conjecture that what Eye-of-the-Moon had wanted was the missing Victoria Cross that he had worn for so many years. He was silent until they came alongside the waggon, when he said: "If you'll tell me just where the rod is, I'll get it for you, and save you the climb."

But Geoff had already raised a foot to one of the rear wheels and was mounting. He crawled in under the canvas, and presently reappeared with the rod and a box of flies. The rod was packed in a baize case, and it occupied him a considerable time to put the many joints together, and to fix the winch and thread the line. Kiddie watched him with intent curiosity. He had never before beheld such a magnificent fishing rod.

"I'm not surprised any at what you said about mine," he observed humbly. "I shouldn't expect the President of the United States to own a more elegant wand than yours. It's just great. And those flies, too. My! they're most as if they were alive, so nat'r'l and real-lookin'!"

Geoff selected a black gnat.

"One of these ought to be simply deadly on a morning like this," he said, with the conviction of an experienced angler.

"No fish could refuse it," Kiddie averred. "I'm just eager to see how it works. Suppose we get along."

Geoff followed him beyond a bend in the trail, and down a steeply inclined track in the direction whence the sound of the river came to them in a continuous musical murmur. He experienced some difficulty in carrying his long rod among the cottonwood trees and willows, but he succeeded in doing so without getting it tangled in the overhanging boughs. After some minutes' arduous walking down the steep, they came to a tiny glen and a rude timber bridge that spanned a shallow tributary stream. Kiddie turned and signed to his companion to stand still. He himself crossed to the middle of the bridge, and remained there looking searchingly up the stream. His sharp eyes had caught a movement at the root of one of the willows and a ripple in the midst of a quiet pool. He nodded in satisfaction, signing to Geoff to come to him, cautioning silence.

Geoff went to his side.

"They're at work, see?" said Kiddie.

What Geoff saw was a colony of brown, furry animals, about the size of terriers, busily moving about. Some were swimming across the stream, carrying small pieces of stick in their mouths, some were plastering mud on the walls of curious-looking hives, while quite a dozen of them were congregated about the roots of a willow tree, at whose lower trunk they had nibbled a deep wedge as cleanly as if it had been done with a woodman's axe.

"What are they?" Geoff questioned, excitedly.

"Beavers, of course," replied Kiddie. "Ain't you ever seen 'em before? Say, they're nearly through with that tree. Watch them!"

The tree had been gnawed at the side nearest the water, and was only sustained by a strip of the unsundered bark at the farther side, at which the rodents were zealously nibbling. Suddenly, as the boys watched, the tree swayed over, until the lips of the incision met, and as the bark was severed it fell with a crash across the stream, when the

beavers scampered away, many escaping into their lodges, and others diving, audibly slapping the surface with their broad, flat tails.

"Guess one of my traps has been sprung," said Kiddie, and, dropping his fishing rod, he strode to the side of the stream, caught up a piece of rusty chain from among the mud, and began to haul it in towards him. There was a commotion in the water, and Geoff presently saw that the chain was attached to a spring trap, in which a particularly large beaver had been caught by one of its webbed hind feet. When the struggling animal was brought to the bank, Kiddie adroitly seized it, and in a moment it was dead.

"If you'd care to have a cap made of this one's pelt, Mee-Mee will make one for you," said Kiddie. "But I guess we'll just leave him here for a while, and come back for him after breakfast."

"It must be awfully fine sport trapping them that way," observed Geoff.

"Tain't for the sport we trap 'em, though," returned Kiddie, turning back towards the bridge. "It's for their fur, and, of course, we cook and eat their tails. Last fall Gideon made over three hundred dollars sellin' pelts we got on this same stream. Gideon's cute."

He led Geoff further down the ravine, until, abruptly emerging from among the willows, they came out upon a flat table of rock, beyond which the brown current of the Sweetwater swirled and eddied through a deep gorge. Geoff ventured out upon the rock and looked upward. So high was the opposite precipice that he could see but a tiny strip of sky. Below him the dark water lapped against rocks that rose like a wall from the depths.

"It's enough to make a chap dizzy to look down there," he said.

"Just where you're standin' now is where I shot my first grizzly bear, four winters back," Kiddie told him—"the biggest bear I'd seen. I lost him though. He slipped back, and went clean through the ice. I figure his bones are still lyin' at the bottom. We call the place Grizzly Notch. Say, you'd better keep away from the edge. Tain't just safe,

wearin' boots with big nails, the same as yours. I might have loaned you a pair of moccasins. You ought to have a considerable catch in this pool," he went on, after a pause. "It's the best place that I know, and there ain't any bushes or trees to snag your line."

He bent forward and pointed down into the dark water, where his keen sight had detected the yet darker form of a trout lying with its snout up stream, motionless but for the occasional lazy wave of its tail or the trembling of its dorsal fin.

"There's a real lusty one down there," he whispered, as though the trout might hear him. "If you just drop your fly front of his nose, I guess he'll fancy it."

Geoff dexterously cast forth his line and saw his fly fall lightly on the water's smooth surface, but many yards away from the trout he aimed at.

"I'll leave you for a while," said Kiddie. "My tackle ain't long enough to reach from here."

He went further down the river bank to where the cliff gave place to broken rocks. Among these he leapt with fearless agility, until he halted upon one far out in the current. He studied the water before making a cast; then he threw out his fly. At the fourth cast he made a strike, and presently a beautiful trout lay panting at his feet. To this two others were added in less than a quarter of an hour. Whatever luck the English boy had had, these, Kiddie decided, would be ample for breakfast, and, stringing them together with a thong from the leather fringe of his jacket, he slowly returned to his companion.

He approached so silently that Geoff did not hear him, but went on with his fishing. As yet he appeared to have caught nothing. Kiddie stood watching him, marvelling at the adroitness with which he handled his long rod and sent his fly far out into the air, to alight as softly as a snowflake upon the surface.

Suddenly, in recovering his upright position after a cast, Geoff staggered, his foot slipped on the wet rock, he lost his balance, fell outward, and disappeared.

"My " exclaimed Kiddie, and dropping his trout and rod

and hat, he listened for the hollow splash. It came very quickly. Without an instant's hesitation, he then ran forward. Half a dozen rapid strides brought him to the verge. With a flying leap he cleared the rock by a good three yards, turned in the air, and shot down like an arrow, cleaving the water with hardly more splash than an arrow would have made.

When he came up to the surface and shook his dripping long hair from his eyes, he saw Geoff Severn struggling, barely half a dozen yards away from him, still with his cap on his head, still clinging tenaciously to the stock of his long fishing rod.

"Say, are you hurt any?" Kiddie called out. "Did you strike the rocks as you fell?"

"No," Geoff answered, with his mouth full of water. "Don't think so." He was a fair swimmer, for he had "passed" for the boats at Eton; but he was encumbered by his rod and his clothes and his heavy boots, and before Kiddie reached him he sank, releasing his hold of the rod, which went under, weighted by its heavy reel. Kiddie seized the thin end of it, however, before it was lost, and managed to hitch a bight of the line over a point of rock, while he watched for Geoff to reappear. He felt something clutch at one of his feet, and, diving again, he caught Geoff's arm and drew him gently upward.

"If you just hold on to me quietly for a while," he said, "I guess I can pull you along to some rocks, where we can get out of this. So: get your hand to the middle of my back, and grip the belt you'll find there. I'm real glad to know you ain't hurt."

Geoff obeyed, and felt himself being towed along at a pace that astonished him. He realised at once that his rescuer was a marvellous swimmer, and with every moment he became more calmly confident, notwithstanding that his teeth were chattering with the extreme cold of the water, and the nervous shock which he had sustained in his fall.

Kiddie took him to the rocks where he himself had been fishing a little while before, and tenderly helped him into the safety of dry land.

"Guess you ain't any the worse, except for the wettin'," he said, "and you've got heaps of dry clothes in those boxes of yours."

Geoff looked at him curiously.

"How did you happen to be in the water so near me?" he questioned. "Did you see me fall in? I don't understand. I only know that I should have been drowned but for you—that I owe my life to you."

"Why, I just happened to be behind you when you slipped," Kiddie explained. "It was my fault. I oughtn't to have let you fish from so dangerous a place. Say, you're cold, standin' here. If you'll walk up this track as far as the bridge from where you saw the beavers, I'll presently bring along your rod. I'm hoping it ain't broken."

Before Geoff could assure him that the loss of the rod did not matter, he had again entered the water and was swimming up stream. Geoff followed the narrow footpath, and had not gone far when he came upon Kiddie's three trout. The sight of the fish astonished him. It did not seem that Kiddie could possibly have had time to catch them, when he himself had not had so much as a nibble; indeed, if it had not been that Kiddie's hat and rod lay beside them, it might almost seem that someone else had left them here.

As he went onward to the bridge, he was saying to himself that this Kiddie of Birkenshaw's Camp was rather a remarkable person, with his killing of bears and Indians, his trapping of beavers, his wonderful riding, and his yet more wonderful swimming. But, of course, he argued, it was not surprising that he could do these things so well, living here in the wilds where game was plentiful, and where physical agility was a necessity of existence. The chances were that, with all his prowess, the fellow could neither read nor write.

Geoff was shivering uncomfortably. The water had been amazingly cold; he had never been in water so icy. He looked down at his clothes, and tried to wring some of the wetness out of them. The contents of his pockets were saturated. He took out his watch to see if it was injured. Yes, it was stopped. He was opening the case when he was startled at hearing a voice at his elbow.

"Guess you're thinkin' it's time for breakfast," said Kiddie. "We'll push along now, and let Mee-Mee have these trout to fry. I've left your rod away back where we landed. 'Tain't broken any. Say, what o'clock is it? By the sun, I should say it's a quarter before seven."

"My watch has got a lot of water in it," said Geoff, turning to accompany him up the path.

"That's likely," nodded Kiddie, and he thrust his hand into his own pocket. "This book is 'most spoiled, too," he deplored, drawing forth a small leather-bound volume, which had obviously suffered from the immersion.

Geoff regarded him in astonishment.

"I shouldn't have expected you to carry a book in your pocket," he remarked, remembering his supposition of a few minutes before that Kiddie could neither read nor write.

"May I look at it?"

Kiddie handed it to him, and he opened its wet leaves.

"I say!" he cried incredulously. "You don't mean to pretend that you can read this—that you read it for pleasure?"

"Why not?" returned Kiddie. "Nobody can say 'tain't interestin'."

"But it's a *Virgil*!" exclaimed Geoff. "Virgil, in the original Latin! Who taught you to understand it?"

"Guess it was Rube Carter," Kiddie answered. "Rube taught me heaps of things, winter nights, when the snow was deep on the ground, and the streams all frozen, and nothing but bleak desolation all around. Rube was 'most as good as a schoolmaster."

"I dare say," said Geoff, returning the book, whose contents were to him objectionably familiar. "You could hardly have lived with an Etonian without learning a lot."

Kiddie went on in advance, and strode up the steep path so quickly that Geoff could only with difficulty follow him. But when he reached the level trail Kiddie waited for him.

"I calculate you'll change your clothes in the waggon," he said. "If you'll leave your wet things on the grass, side of the trail, I'll come down for them after a while, and get them dried."

On the previous afternoon Tom Lippincott had helped Geoff to pitch a bell tent at the wayside near the waggon, and now, when Geoff went up in his wet clothes, he discovered his father within the tent, waiting for his shaving-water to boil on a spirit stove that he had just lighted. Seated on a camp stool at the entrance, smoking a cigarette, Mr. Severn was reading out of Rube Carter's copy-book, which he had not before been able properly to examine. A map of the State of Wyoming lay open at his feet. Opposite to him Isa Blagg leaned lazily against the hub of the back wheel of the waggon, nursing his wounded left shoulder.

"You look as if you'd been having a swim," remarked Mr. Severn, seeing his son's condition.

"An involuntary one," smiled Geoff. "I fell into the river down there, and might even have been drowned if that dark-skinned young chap they call Kiddie hadn't jumped in after me and fished me out."

"I'm tired of telling you to be careful," said the little lawyer, reproachfully.

"Kiddie again!" muttered the sheriff. "That there boy's just a marvel; never seen such a one for allus turnin' up on the spot when thar's danger knockin' around—lives to be saved, or—or lives to be taken. I wonder where he blew off from! You may lay your bottom dollar he ain't no offspring of Gideon Birkenshaw's. He ain't nothing like Gideon."

Mr. Severn was not in the smallest degree interested in Kiddie. His attention this morning was wholly concentrated upon the business which had brought him out west to Wyoming, and he resented interruption.

"You were saying just now, sheriff," he said, resuming a broken conversation with that rough-looking representative of American law, "that the name Fritton is entirely unknown to you."

"That's so," drawled Isa. "Guess it'll puzzle you to locate anyone of that name between here and Leavenworth, anyway. English, you say? Never knew anyone English live in these parts since I've ridden along the Salt Lake Trail, though I've heard say that Rube Carter'd a considerable

dash of English blood in him. How long back are you speakin' of ? ”

“ Sixteen or seventeen years,” answered Mr. Severn.

“ Chew ! ” exclaimed Isa Blagg. “ Heaps of things have happened in all them years. I was a clerk in a lawyer’s bureau in St. Louis about then. ‘ Tain’t a wonder I don’t remember him. Say, what’s brought you on his trail ? I’ll gamble he’d good cause to hide hisself—some crime he committed, eh ? ”

Mr. Severn dropped his cigarette, and stamped on it.

“ As you’re a responsible lawyer, and may help me,” he returned, “ I may as well tell you my business concerning him. He is not a criminal, or was not one when he left home, whatever he may be since, and I am not here to arrest him. I wish to find him in order that I may induce him to return to England to lay claim to the family estates and fortune, and to assume the title of high nobility which is now rightfully and indisputably his.”

“ Kind of romantic thing I’ve read about in the Sunday newspapers,” commented the sheriff, spitting a jet of tobacco juice several feet away from him. “ Heir to an English peerage forsakin’ his ancestral home ; trampoosin’ about the world, turnin’ bar-tender in some out-west drinkin’ saloon, or mixin’ with the scum of the earth in some played-out minin’ camp ; degeneratin’ until he’s ashamed to cast the shadder of his countenance on decent serciety. That’s about the size of it, I reckon. Sort of prodigal son business over again ; fatted calf waitin’ for him, and all that, eh ? ”

“ I understand,” pursued Mr. Severn, “ that when Captain Fritton came out to Wyoming he bought a ranch somewhere on the Little Laramie River, which, I see by this map, is some two hundred miles eastward of here. We must have been within a day’s journey of the place when we camped at Fort Laramie. Reuben Carter, whom you mentioned just now, was his companion, or partner. They had been schoolfellows and officers in the same cavalry regiment, and they came out west together. Captain Fritton had already changed his name, and I have yet to discover what name he assumed, and why his own was not good enough. You see, he has designedly

hidden his identity, and that makes it extremely awkward. There are, however, some circumstances which may lead to his recognition."

"Thar's one way by which you can allus detect a Britisher," interposed the sheriff. "Your Britisher never can cure hisself of the habit of risin' with his saddle, and he allus hitches his stirrups short. Rube Carter rode that way."

"Ah," reflected Mr. Severn, "I have observed that you frontiersmen are most ungainly riders—that you do not bend your knees. I have not yet seen a decent horseman among the lot of you."

His son Geoff had changed his clothes by this time, and alighted from the waggon. He had heard that last remark.

"Oh, come!" he exclaimed. "That fellow Buckskin Jack is simply a perfect horseman. Do the Yanks justice, pater."

But Mr. Severn was not disposed to enter into a discussion on riding. He promptly resumed his story.

"There is one thing in particular that may lead to the discovery of the missing officer," he continued, still addressing the sheriff. "I find that he so far ignored his position and upbringing as an English gentleman as to marry a red-skinned savage—the daughter of an Indian chief with an unpronounceable name. This circumstance must surely have distinguished him—made him a marked man."

"Dunno about that," smiled Isa Blagg. "Heaps of fool men have done the same. Squaw men, we call 'em. 'Tain't anyways unusual, and 'tain't difficult. You just buy the girl from her father, arrangin' the bargain over a pipe, so many ponies, so many buffalo robes, and the thing's as bindin' as if your Archbishop of Canterbury had officiated at the weddin'. Jim Beckworth was a squaw man, so was Belden, Frank Armour, and Jim Carston; so was Rube Carter. They all married Injun women. Say, your shavin'-water's on the boil!"

Mr. Severn leaned forward and removed the dipper of boiling water from the spirit stove.

"I assume that the marriage was perfectly legal," he went on, "but that is not now a material point; for it seems that

Captain Fritton soon became a widower, his wife and little son being killed during an Indian raid on the ranch. This must have happened some fourteen years ago, and, unfortunately, the fragmentary statement of Reuben Carter carries the story no further. I am at a complete loss to know how I am to obtain fuller information. Can you advise me, sheriff? Can you help me?"

Isa Blagg stood upright and strode nearer to the tent.

"Wa-al, I don't just know, Mr. Severn," said he; "I guess it's most the same as askin' a man to go scoutin' Injuns after a heavy fall of snow, when the trail's all covered, and you can't follow it nohow. Fourteen years is a considerable time, and it's more than likely your man has altered his appearance, as well as his name. Buckskin Jack might tell you suthin', I calculate. He comes from back Laramie way, and knows most of what's gone along the trail the past score of years."

"He knows nothing of Captain Fritton, though," put in Geoff, glancing round from the camp looking-glass, at which he was combing his hair inside the tent. "I have cross-questioned him myself, and he knows nothing whatever."

"Nevertheless," decided Mr. Severn, "I fancy he might be able to throw some light on the matter. He is rather an intelligent fellow, and, if he has been living in that neighbourhood so long—why, it's impossible he should be wholly ignorant of things that must have taken place under his very eyes."

"I'd say so," agreed the sheriff. "But I'm just afraid you're too late thinkin' of it. Buckskin Jack's miles and miles away from Birkenshaw's Camp by this time, and there ain't any tellin' whether he'll be along here again this side of winter. Buck was allus of the trampoosin' sort, here to-day and gone to-morrow, and ain't never got what you'd call a permanent address."

"Oh, indeed," said Mr. Severn, dipping his shaving-brush into the hot water. "That is disappointing, decidedly disappointing. But, no doubt, I shall discover someone at Fort Laramie who will help me just as well as he could have done. I shall return there at once."

And, applying the soapy brush to his face, he straightway dismissed all thought of the dark-bearded frontiersman from his mind, not dreaming that Buckskin Jack, who had so quietly and effectually disappeared, had taken with him the certain knowledge which he, and he alone, of all living men, could supply.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW RECRUIT

"Ah," sighed Gideon Birkenshaw, crossing his legs as he sat in his customary corner of the verandah, where the warm light of the setting sun fell upon him through the screen of reddening creepers, "we're a small company by what we was a week ago. Only four of us 'stead of eight! What's agoin' ter be done? Seems to me it's gettin' about time we'd a kind of pow-wow, and passed some sort of a resolution on ways and means."

"Jes' what I was thinkin'," agreed Abe Harum, raking out his pipe with the point of his bowie knife. "It's clear as glass we can't go far on this trail, not without help; winter comin' on. Thar's the timber to be hauled in and stacked, cattle to be rounded up and branded, ponies to be sold, stores to be bought, the roof to be mended, and the Express biz to be seen to the same time."

"That's the partic'lar wall I've struck agin," declared Gideon. "Whatever else happens along, the Express business certainly ain't one to be neglected. But where we're to git more hands from is a problem I ain't capable of straightenin' out, and I shall be owin' suthin' to any one of you three if you'll trot out some sensible suggestions. Who's to take Rube Carter's place, and Nat Bixbee's and Lew Denver's? That's what I'm waitin' to know. With them to count on, we'd just about as slick a team of riders as you'll locate on the whole trail 'tween the Missouri and Sacramento. Without 'em, and barrin' yourself, Abe—well, we ain't just great."

Tom Lippincott pointed the stem of his pipe towards Mee-Mee, who stood at the side of the well, an exceedingly picturesque figure in the evening sunlight.

"Mrs. Carter, thar, c'd allus take her turn at a pinch," he suggested.

Gideon sniffed disapprovingly.

"Dare say she could," said he, "but that there pinch ain't goin' to come along while I'm boss of this yer station. 'Tain't the pinch as I'm perplexed about, Tom, but the reg'lar service; and, while there's able-bodied men to be had in the State of Wyoming, I ain't hankerin' after lettin' female women do their responsible work."

"Well, then," pursued Tom, "there's Nat's brother Dave, livin' at a loose end at Crazy Woman's Creek. He'd do, sure."

"Dave Bixbee's got bad eyes," the boss reminded him, "and he ain't no more use than a flittermouse to defend the mails agin Injuns or road agents, or to find his way through a blizzard. Dave's no good, and you may sit right back if you can't fork out a better suggestion than that."

Abe Harum succeeded, after a long effort, in extracting a stubborn wad of very black and juicy tobacco from his pipe.

"What about Kiddie?" he questioned. "I'd like to know why he ain't fit to carry the mails. He ain't just a helpless juvenile now, and I calculate you've nursed him about long enough. He can ride, I guess; and he ain't quite a fool at shootin'. As for his eyes—they're 'most as good as telescopes."

Gideon fiercely slapped the back of his hand, and brushed from it a squashed mosquito. He was peculiarly a victim to these ravenous insects.

"Don't know that I could bring myself to spare him," he said, glancing aside to the verandah steps, where Kiddie sat, fashioning a new fishing rod on the plan of Geoff Severn's.

"But he's kind of eligible," pursued Abe.

"Sure," declared the boss emphatically. "But I ain't notioning to force him any."

Kiddie returned his glance, dropped his work, and stood up, hitching his breeches as he strode slowly nearer to the men.

"If you're ready to swear that I'm turned seventeen," he said, addressing Gideon, "then I figure I'm as eligible as anyone else, and I'm about willin' to join right now."

" You look every day of seventeen, Kiddie," returned Birkenshaw, " and I guess there ain't any person knockin' around these parts who can produce your birth certificate." His eyes followed the threatening flight of another mosquito. " Say, are you serious ? " he asked, as if he were speaking to the buzzing insect.

" Why, yes," Kiddie answered. " I ain't gifted with humour, and don't joke."

" Then," said Gideon, " I notion you may as well push along to Fort Laramie, and offer your esteemed services to the agent there. Suppose you start to-morrow, along with Lawyer Severn's outfit ? He's kind of anxious to add to his armed escort. Isa Blagg's goin' east with him, too ; and I guess he'll fix the business up for you, legal."

Mr. Severn had remained several days longer at Birkenshaw's Camp than he had intended, in the hope that Buckskin Jack might possibly return. But, as he was an ardent sportsman, he did not greatly regret the otherwise fruitless delay. Here, on the Sweetwater, there was excellent trout-fishing, while in the neighbouring forest, and on the slopes of the foot-hills, there was an abundance of game.

Every morning he and Geoff had gone out early together, either with rod or with gun, to return late in the evening with full baskets, or with their ponies heavily laden. But the long vacation was already drawing to its close ; the Law Courts and Eton College called them respectively, and there was need to hasten back eastward to catch their steamer at New York.

Kiddie had seen but little of either of them during those days of strenuous sport. His work on the ranch had occupied him, and much though he desired to be near them, to hear them talk about England and things English, in which he was curiously interested, he was too bashful to bring himself into their especial notice. And so now, when he was accompanying them on their journey along the trail, he rather avoided them, lest they should consider him unduly inquisitive. It followed, therefore, that although he rode in their company, and often at the side of their waggon, they had learned as little of him and his history when they arrived

at Fort Laramie, as they had known on the morning when he rescued Geoff from the cold grip of Grizzly Notch.

Concerning that rescue, neither of them was ungrateful ; but it was not until he returned to Birkenshaw's that Kiddie discovered how deep their gratitude really was. Expecting no reward, hardly looking even for thanks, he was surprised when he got home to the camp to find that Mr. Severn had left for him a gift of a new Winchester rifle, and Geoff a present of a parcel of English books.

At Fort Laramie Mr. Severn and his son left their "outfit," and, attended by Isa Blagg, took a horse journey up the Little Laramie River, in search of information concerning the missing Lord St. Olave. It was easy and safe riding across the Laramie plains, but the trip occupied them two full days, and those two days, as Geoff afterwards declared, were utterly wasted, for they returned as ignorant as when they started.

Kiddie was too anxious about his own affairs to go with them, and he remained in the little town waiting for Isa, and making repeated calls at the branch bureau of Russell, Majors, and Waddell, who were the founders and contractors of the Overland Stage Line and the Pony Express.

This firm despatched a stage coach daily, with passengers, baggage, and mails, across the American continent, between St. Joseph and San Francisco, a distance of nearly 2000 miles. The coaches were strong, light vehicles, drawn by a team of six horses, or by the same number of mules. They covered the ground at what appeared to be a break-neck pace ; but even at their greatest speed the journey occupied them from fifteen to twenty days, and the gold miners of California demanded a quicker time for the delivery of their important letters. To meet this demand the Pony Express had been established. By a well-arranged system of relays of horses every thirty miles or so, and of riders every 250 miles, the journey was reduced to an average of nine days, and on one important occasion it was covered in seven days and seventeen hours—the quickest trip ever made.

And what a journey it was ! The trail stretched its narrow length across prairie and mountain alike ; through Kansas,

through Nebraska, by Fort Kearney, along the Platte River, by Fort Laramie, past the Buttes, through Wyoming, over the Rocky Mountains into Utah, and so, by Fort Bridger and Salt Lake City, to the destination at Sacramento. The riders were picked men, and they received from 100 to 125 dollars a month, but they well earned their pay. To endure the strain, great physical strength and endurance were necessary, as were coolness, bravery, and resourcefulness. Their lives were in constant peril, and they were at times obliged to do double duty when the comrade who was to relieve them had been disabled, or failed to appear at the relay station.

Ten miles an hour was their average pace in hilly country ; but there were sections of the route where they were expected to cover twenty-five miles an hour. No weather deterred them. They faced the blinding blizzards of winter ; they bent their heads before the swirling sand storms of summer. By hottest noon and darkest night they sped upon their lonely way ; now skirting the level banks of quiet streams, now rising to rocky heights, hugging the brink of awful precipices, flashing through deep defiles, plunging across flooded rivers and high-flung bridges, or galloping into echoing cañons infested with outlaws lying in wait to intercept the mail, or with watchful savages eager to claim the daring rider's scalp.

It was to volunteer for such work as this that Kiddie had ridden to Fort Laramie. He knew its dangers ; but he also knew its fascinations. His young veins tingled for the excitement, the thrilling activity ; and he offered himself unabashed by the prospect of the responsibility.

" My boy," said the agent, when he presented himself, " you are too young for a Pony Express rider. It takes men for that business."

" I rode for a month as extra last fall on the Sweetwater division, sir," said Kiddie, " and I think I am better able to ride now."

" So ? You are the boy that filled Rube Carter's place when he was hurt, are you ? " nodded the agent. " Say, now, can you handle a gun ? "

"Guess I can," returned Kiddie, confident that everything was now all right. "Buckskin Jack thinks so, anyway; and Sheriff Blagg is ready to say a word for me."

The agent put his hand on Kiddie's shoulder.

"He has already said it," he smiled. "I've heard a heap about what you've been doing lately—scouting for Buck, shooting Indians, rescuing English boys from Grizzly Notch—and I've a notion you'll just fit into the scheme of things as well as anybody. I warn you it's dangerous; 'tain't child's play. But if you can do a man's work, you shall have a man's money. That's a fair offer, I guess; and, if you're anyways willing to take it, you can sign the bill and join right now."

The "bill" that the candidate was to sign was a pledge drawn up by one of the partners in the firm, and it ran as follows :

"I, _____, do hereby solemnly swear, before the great and living God, that during my engagement with, and while I am in the employ of, Russell, Majors, and Waddell, I will, under no circumstances, use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating liquors of any kind, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and that in every respect I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my employers. So help me, God!"

There was nothing in this pledge to which Kiddie could not willingly subscribe, and he signed it without hesitation, using the name, "Kiddie Birkenshaw," which was the only one he knew.

"You can start soon as you like on Birkenshaw's division," said the agent, "and your pay will begin from the day you make your first ride."

"Birkenshaw's division?" repeated Kiddie wonderingly.

"Yes," returned the agent. "Gideon has been appointed agent for the Three Crossings section. If you'd waited until to-morrow, he could have engaged you on his own responsibility. But I'm not sorry you're here, and, to show you that I have confidence in you, I'm going to entrust you with a valuable parcel. Mr. Birkenshaw will have the duty of paying all the men on his section. Next Monday is the



The agent put his hand on Kiddie's shoulder: "I warn you it's dangerous; 'tain't child's play."

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monthly pay day, and you will carry the money to him—two thousand five hundred dollars. I know it will be safe under your charge. And the sheriff will be with you in case anything happens."

Kiddie had arranged to meet the sheriff in Dan Brierley's saloon, and when he entered that haunt of iniquity, having hitched his pony to the tie-post outside, there were about a score of cowboys present, gambling, and drinking, and making clamour enough for a hundred. None seemed to notice him as he went quietly up to Isa Blagg, who stood chatting with the proprietor at the bar counter.

"Do you reckon on making a start soon, sheriff?" Kiddie inquired. "I'm 'most ready. I've only got to call at the bureau."

"What're you goin' there for?" Isa asked him. "Ain't you fixed everythin' up yet?"

Kiddie shook his head. He did not think it wise here and now to make any reference to the money he was to carry.

"What's your drink?" invited Isa. "Lemon squash? That's teetotal."

"I ain't anyways thirsty," Kiddie answered.

"If people drank only when they was thirsty," said Dan Brierley, "I guess I'd have to close this here emporium, slick."

"Wal, he knows best," said the sheriff, "and I ain't the one to persuade him. If youngsters wasn't forced to drink agin their inclinations, we should be livin' in a better world."

Kiddie watched the gamblers at the faro table nearest to him. They were as wicked-looking a lot of desperadoes as he had ever set eyes on, and their language would certainly not have accorded with the pledge that he himself had just signed. Each had a pile of dollars and greenbacks beside him, and the right hand of each was never far from his six-shooter, which he seemed ready to use on the slightest provocation.

"I should like to know just what that there Britisher was trying to spy out along here, anyway," remarked a man at the next table, while, with astonishing rapidity, he dealt out the cards. "He ain't been buying up cattle, nor hosses,

nor land, and he ain't no fur trader, nor nothin' of that sort. Wonder if he's been prospectin' for a railroad, to take the place of the Pony Express?"

"By the inquiries he's been makin' everywheres," said another, "I'd judge he was notionin' to write a history of the Great Salt Lake Trail."

"Rather a cute idea, that of yours, Bill," interposed a third—"just in line with what I figured out myself; only that I guessed it was a treatise on the Injun tribes of the United States he was compilin'. He was a whole lot sweet on findin' out about Injun raids."

Isa Blagg emptied his glass, and reached for the bottle to refill it.

"You ain't a one of you within a mile of being on the right scent," said he. "He's an English lawyer; that's what he is, and what he came out here for was to locate a man that he was kind of anxious to transfer a monster pile of dollars to—a man that vamoosed from his ancestral home in England a matter of eighteen years back, and hasn't chirped a stave ever since to let on where he's hidin'." He turned to Kiddie. "What's the name of him, again? I allus forget it."

"Fritton," said Kiddie, his voice breaking in upon a sudden hush—"Captain Reginald Fritton. He's Earl St. Olave, by rights."

"Anybody recollect him?" pursued the sheriff, addressing the saloon at large. "He's believed to have owned a ranch somewhere here about, along with Rube Carter."

"Guess everybody knew Rube," said one of the cowboys. "Best rider on the trail."

"Ain't he found no clue to him then?" questioned the one who had first spoken. "If nobody else has pegged a claim to them dollars, I guess I've got a use for 'em. And I'm ready to swear that I'm an earl, you bet."

"The last certain clue is kind of stale," returned Isa Blagg, who was pursuing the subject in the hope of making som' discovery in the saloon. "'Tain't no fresher than fourteen years old, and even so it's some hazy. Seems there was an Injun raid on this yer chap's ranch about that time, and his squaw and olive branches was wiped out."

"Fourteen years is as good as a century back, as far as Fort Laramie's concerned," said the man named Bill. "The place was a barren, uninhabited waste, without even a shanty to give it a name."

"Fourteen year back?" queried Dan Brierley from behind the bar. "That's when I was bar-tender in a saloon at Leavenworth. Fort Laramie didn't exist, and there wasn't even a trail that you could swear by; but I notion there was one or two trappers lived up the Little River. Fourteen year? Let's see! Guess I kind of remember about that raid you speak of, sheriff."

Kiddie did not betray that he was listening intently.

"So?" questioned Isa.

"Sure," said Dan, "my old father was along here prospectin' at the time, and, when he came home to Leavenworth, with an arrow wound in his leg, he told us about that raid. Winter time, it was, and the Sioux were knockin' around. And now, as I think, blamed if it wasn't your friend Eye-of-the-Moon that was leadin' them! I don't figure he was the boss war chief he is now, yet 'twas him that led the raid, sure! But I guess the Redskins got the worst of it that trip, though they took heaps of scalps, and Eye-of-the-Moon was obliged to scoot like a jack rabbit, leavin' most of his braves behind, and you may just gamble they didn't get a whole lot of mercy."

"Say, is your father livin' anywhere near here now?" Kiddie inquired.

"Certainly," returned the saloon keeper. "He's boss of the Long Horn Hotel, in Leavenworth."

Kiddie nudged the sheriff's arm.

"Let's quit," he whispered. "I ain't fond of bein' here."

He was moving away, intending to wait for Isa outside, when one of the gamblers, a desperado whom he had heard addressed as Barney, approached the bar counter.

"Say, sheriff," he said, with an impudent leer, "who's this yere tenderfoot friend of yours?"

"Tenderfoot?" repeated Isa, with a smile. "It's the first time I've heard of a tenderfoot bein' appointed to the Pony Express, the same as he's just been. He's Gid Birken-

shaw's Kiddie, if you want ter know, and," he added, pointedly, "I guess he's no fool with the gun."

Barney opened his bleared eyes.

"He-uh!" he exclaimed. "Been appointed Express rider, has he? That's worth a drink all round, I guess." He turned to the company, "Say, boys, name your nose paint, all of you. Here's a young shaver goin' to treat us all to drinks!"

Kiddie knew too well the character of these men openly to resent the suggestion, although he had taken an instant antipathy to their spokesman. He had the money which he had received from Buckskin Jack in exchange for the Victoria Cross, and, so long as he himself was not required to drink intoxicants, he was ready to pay his footing. Isa, however, would not hear of his doing so, and himself volunteered to defray the expense.

While the drinks were being served, Kiddie saw Barney slip to a distant corner of the saloon, and engage in a whispered conversation with a desperado equally evil-looking. Kiddie was too far off to hear what was said, but he felt instinctively that he was himself the subject of their talk.

What Barney said was this :

"That's him, Charlie. That's him that's to carry the boodle, standin' alongside of Isa Blagg. He'll start soon, I notion, and it's a clean two thousand dollars for you and me if we draw a bead on him in White Eagle Gulch—Savvy?"

CHAPTER XIII

HOW KIDDIE CHANGED PONIES

ISA BLAGG was in no great hurry to leave the saloon. Dan Brierley was an old-time acquaintance of his, whom he had not met for many months, and the two had much to talk about. But Barney and Charlie and a third man, named Spashett, had strolled out and mounted their ponies as soon as they had discovered that there was no more gratuitous drink in prospect.

When at last Isa was induced to leave, Kiddie, always interested in horses, noticed which three had been taken from the tie-posts. One, which had been hitched next to his own, had been a black one, with white stockings and a white blaze up the face, another had been a chestnut, and the third a piebald.

“Guess I shall not go farther than Hot Springs with you this journey, Kiddie,” the sheriff declared, as they were riding through the town together. “I heard from Dan that my brother Alf’s there, stayin’ with sister Dinah, and I calculate on payin’ Dinah a surprise visit. Do you feel like puttin’ up there along o’ me? Dinah’ll give you a shake down, I promise you.”

Kiddie shook his head.

“I shall ride right on through the night if you ain’t goin’ to give me your company, sheriff,” he responded. “I figure I shall do the whole two hundred miles inside of twelve hours.”

“Don’t just see why you should hustle any when you ain’t carryin’ the express mails,” said Isa, “though certainly it’s kind of useful practice, ridin’ on time.”

“I shall not hustle until I’ve said good night to you at Hot Springs,” said Kiddie.

He was delayed half an hour or so at the agent's, and, when at sunset time he left the bureau, he had the two thousand five hundred dollars safely stowed away under his leather jacket, and was anxious to make a start. But even yet the sheriff was not ready; for he had taken the opportunity of calling upon a surgeon to have his wounded shoulder professionally dressed, and the operation took time.

They rode at an easy fox trot for the first few miles. Isa was more than usually talkative.

"I've a kind of idea, Kiddie, that Britishers ain't a whole lot mean, after all," he remarked, as they were crossing Laramie Plain in the deepening dusk. "Lawyer Severn paid me ten dollars more'n I was prepared to charge him, and, takin' him all round, he behaved from first to last like a real gentleman. I'm told he considered' himself indebted some to Rube Carter for information contained in certain documents Rube left behind. Many a man would just have appropriated that information, and said no more about it; but Mr. Severn stumped up to Rube's widow, payin' her just what he would have paid Rube, and I think that was real nice. Real nice, it was."

"Did Lawyer Severn happen to leave his address with you, sheriff?" Kiddie inquired, after a long pause.

"Why, certainly," returned Isa. "I've got to write to him if I locate the missin' nobleman. It's Lincoln's Inn, London—kind of hotel, I presume."

"No," Kiddie corrected. "'Tain't an hotel. I've read about it. It's one of the Inns of Court, where lawyers are called to the Bar and do their law business. I don't fancy Mr. Severn would have his home there—only his bureau."

"Say, d'you figure you're goin' to take this inquiry out of my hands then, and claim the reward?" questioned Isa, in a tone of suspicion.

"Guess it couldn't be in better hands than yours, sheriff, seein' you're a sort of lawyer yourself," returned Kiddie. "I was only thinkin' I might want to write to him myself some day."

He put spurs to his pony, not wishing to enter further into the subject before he had had a consultation with Gideon

Birkenshaw. He was very much disturbed by what he had heard in Brierley's saloon. Dan had stated very positively that the leader of the Indian raid of fourteen years ago was Eye-of-the-Moon, and the information, apparently unimportant in itself, had sent strange thoughts surging through Kiddie's brain. After the unsuccessful foray, Eye-of-the-Moon had escaped, unattended by any of his braves, and what was more probable than that he had escaped in the direction of the North Platte River, and that he had taken shelter in the lonely dug-out shanty, wherein Gideon Birkenshaw lived as a trapper?

It seemed to Kiddie that the incidents synchronised, and Gideon's description of the fugitive warrior at the time of his arrival applied exactly. Eye-of-the-Moon had arrived during a time of winter storm, on a broken-kneed horse. He was wounded; he carried several scalps—the scalps of white men; and he had come from the eastward, over the storm-swept mountains.

What Kiddie could not explain to himself was the extraordinary circumstance that Eye-of-the-Moon, wounded as he was, and flying from his enemies, should have borne with him a little helpless child. Was it a merciful tenderness for that infant that had caused him thus to encumber himself, or was there some other more potent motive for his curious clemency?

But, above all, Kiddie was perplexed over the incident of the Victoria Cross, which the chief had worn during all those fourteen years. He recalled Gideon's words, spoken as he examined the bronze medal: "This here token that he's took such care of was around your own neck, Kiddie, not his, when he brought you along."

He dared hardly confront the one and only obvious inference. Yet now, as he galloped by the sheriff's side, he found himself constantly going back to it. The thing was beginning to haunt him, and the significant words attuned themselves to the beat of his pony's hoofs, "When he brought you along; when he brought you along."

There was no disputing the fact that the cross had been honourably gained for valour in battle by Captain Reginald

Fritton, whose ranch Eye-of-the-Moon had raided, and that Reginald Fritton was the missing Earl St. Olave. But how had it happened that the medal had been suspended from his, Kiddie's neck, when Eye-of-the-Moon "brought him along"? Surely it betokened that he himself had been a victim of that same raid—a member of Captain Fritton's household!

Kiddie drew rein, and his pony dropped to a trot.

"Say, sheriff," he inquired, "d'you know for sure that this here Captain Fritton was married?"

"Why certainly," the sheriff answered. "He was a squaw man. His squaw's name was Pine Leaf. She was a daughter of a Sioux chief, and I'm not anyways doubting that the marriage was strictly legal."

Kiddie's heart beat faster. This was news to him, for he had not been taken into Mr. Severn's confidence, and even Geoff had never spoken to him of the contents of Rube Carter's statement. But Gideon Birkenshaw had mentioned the name Pine Leaf. "Your mother's name was Pine Leaf," he had said.

"How many kids?" he asked nervously.

Isa Blagg bent forward to swish the flies from his pony's ears.

"Guess there was one," he answered—"a boy, two or three year old. Guess that little boy'd have been heir to a good thing if he'd lived; but it's kind of presumptive evidence that he was killed by the Injuns, along of his Kedskin mother."

Kiddie lapsed into thoughtful silence for a while. Was it possible that he himself was that child who was supposed to have been murdered? Was it possible that he, Kiddie of Birkenshaw's Camp, away here in wild Wyoming, was the heir to an English peerage? The idea was too much for him to contemplate. There must be some other explanation. Again he spurred his pony.

"I've a notion you'll never make a great success as a Pony Express rider, Kiddie," said the sheriff, as he, too, broke into a canter. "You're a sight too irregular in your pace, and you don't consider your pony's feelings a whole lot. If you notion to trot, then trot; if you want to gallop, then gallop. But you'll never be hand and glove with any pony

if you figure to do both things at once, the same as you've been doin' the past half-hour!"

"Then," said Kiddie, "I decide to gallop right away into Hot Springs. There's an ugly cloud gatherin' over the mountains yonder, and if you'd save your sister Dinah the job of dryin' your togs, we'd best push on, like the riders in front of us."

"Eh?" Isa Blagg glanced aside at him. "I ain't seen no riders in front of us; nor heard 'em."

"Maybe not," returned his companion, "but they're there—two of them."

"You ain't a owl, Kiddie," the sheriff rejoined good-humouredly, "and though your eyes are gen'ally kept well skinned, I don't notion you can see in the darkness quite as well as the fowl I've mentioned."

"But I never said that I'd seen them," Kiddie protested.

"Then how in thunder can you tell they're there?" Isa demanded to know.

Kiddie felt at the lump under his jacket to assure himself that the money was still safe. He was thinking of the three desperadoes who had gone out together from the saloon.

"Dare say you noticed there'd been a shower of rain while you were in at the doctor's?" he began. "It was just enough to wet the dust. Well, when we got outside the town, you might also have noticed that the trail was marked by three sep'rate sets of hoofs, going side by side, never crossin'. They'd turned up the dry dust, and, therefore, must have started after the fall of rain."

"Thought you said there was only two riders in front of us," the sheriff interrupted.

"That's so," acknowledged Kiddie. "Supposin' that both horses have riders. Three ponies started, however, and they went in company until they struck the Fort Bridger Trail, when one of them branched off. I guess the other two riders wouldn't go foolin' across the prairie a dark night like this. They'd keep to the trail, anyway. Certainly they've not turned back, or we should have seen them. I calculate they're in front of us, a mile or two this side of Hot Springs."

"If they've got as far as that, they've hustled along pretty

considerable," conjectured the sheriff, "for they can't have had more'n a half-hour's start of us, and I guess we've been movin' at a good pace ourselves."

"Yes," said Kiddie. "Their hoof marks showed they'd been ridin' at the gallop, and they didn't even slow down when their friend was partin' from them, for their track wasn't broken, but went straight on, as I could just make out in the dusk."

"Cavalrymen from Fort Laramie," surmised Isa. "One goin' to Fort Bridger, the other two to Fort Hall. I notion you'll overtake those two, 'tother side of White Eagle Gulch."

"Dare say you're right there," breathed Kiddie, much relieved. He took comfort in the surmise that the men were soldiers. After all, he had no reason to suppose that they were anything else. He had told no one—not even the sheriff himself—that he was to be the bearer of a large sum of money, and there could be no danger of his being attacked and robbed.

At the near side of Hot Springs, when the rain was beginning, Isa Blagg parted from him, and rode off towards a farmstead whose lighted windows showed like friendly beacons through the blackness of the surrounding trees. Kiddie had dismounted to examine his pony's near forefoot. The animal had been limping slightly during the last mile. He struck a match, and found that a long nail was wedged across the shoe, pressing upon the frog.

"Guess this was beginning to hurt you some, Beauty," he said to the pony. "'Tain't any wonder you were limpin'." He dropped the match, and proceeded to remove the obstruction with his strong fingers. But it was stubborn. "Queer!" he muttered, in anxious surprise. "I'd vow that nail never got there without help." He gave it a sharp twist, and dislodged it. Then he struck another match, and, shielding it under his waterproof cape—for the rain was now fallin' heavily—he carefully examined the nail. It was a long one and rusty. But what surprised him most about it was that it had been newly filed at both ends, and so bent and sharpened that it would fit exactly between the arms of the horseshoe, causing an increasing irritation without actually laming the horse.

He pocketed the nail.

"Say, Beauty," he said, "I dunno what you think about this incident, but I figure some skunk or another's had the notion of delaying us. Wanted to gain time, I reckon. I hope I ain't libellin' an innocent man, but I've got a kind of suspicion that that skunk goes by the name of Barney, and that he's got wind of what we're carryin'. Called me a tenderfoot, did he? Guess we shall see presently what a tenderfoot can do when there's road agents knockin' around.

"I've been in many a tight corner in my time," Kiddie ruminated, as he remounted and spread his cape about him so that the rain might stream off without wetting him; "but I've never before felt the same sort of nervousness that I have about me now. Guess it's the money I'm carryin' that makes me so. I ain't anyways afraid for myself. Wo, Beauty; you weren't told to go on yet."

He hesitated, thinking.

"Now, what had I best do?" he asked himself. "Cut back after the sheriff, and get him to come along with a posse of boys and arrest the skunks? No; this ain't in Isa Blagg's district, anyway, and a Pony Express man ain't supposed to do police work. Go ahead, Beauty. Let's just trust to luck. After all, we're not certain sure that Barney knows anythin' about the dollars. Don't know how he could, unless someone at the agency back in Fort Laramie has been talkin'. Yet Barney must have had somethin' to do with that nail business," he reflected. "He and his two pards had time to slip the thing in while I was waiting for Isa."

He rode on into Hot Springs. This was hardly more than a dozen miles beyond Fort Laramie, and he would not change horses until he had passed through White Eagle Gulch, and reached the station at the crossing of Horse Shoe Creek.

A bull waggon occupied the roadway in front of the saloon, which formed the central point of the little town. The dim oil lamps within cast their yellow rays through the windows and upon the weary, steaming bullocks that were patiently waiting for the bullwhackers to finish their drinks. The men filed forth as Kiddie came abreast of the outfit. He quickly singled out the waggon master.

"Say, boss," he said, addressing him in the drawling tones of the West, "are you shapin' to get to Fort Laramie t'night?" The waggon master grinned.

"D'yous take us for the Pony Express?" he responded. "Guess we'll camp out on the plains. What's your news?"

"Ain't got any," returned Kiddie. "You'd have got more from the two soldiers you passed a while back."

"Gallows-lookin' soldiers, they was," nodded the waggon master. "Shouldn't ambition to trust the safety of the United States to the likes of them. Reckon you'd be kind of wise to give 'em a wide range if you're goin' west, and have got any greenbacks in them saddle pouches of yours. That one on the piebald ain't a Sabbath-school teacher, you bet. Goin' to be a wet night, I notion."

"Yep," agreed Kiddie. "But the rain keeps away the 'skeeters, and that's one good thing. So long!"

There was no need for him now to watch the trail for hoof marks, even if it had been light enough to see them. He had the assurance that the two horsemen were in front of him, and that they were not soldiers, but highwaymen.

Piebald ponies were common enough on the plains, but it was a natural inference that the one he had seen in Laramie was the same that had lately gone along the trail, and that the rider who was something far different from a Sunday-school teacher, was none other than the man Barney. It did not greatly matter to Kiddie who Barney's companion might be. They were birds of a feather, and he had an instinct that they had designs against him. It was this instinct which disturbed him, for he was not conscious of having ever before had a personal enemy.

His duty as an Express rider was to keep to the beaten trail, and to allow nothing to detain him unnecessarily; but it was a recognised duty, nevertheless, to make a detour when danger threatened. Danger threatened him now, but exactly where the peril lay he could not tell, and his only alternative, therefore, was to go on, and to keep eyes and ears constantly on the alert.

Nothing aroused his further suspicions until he had left the

prairie land far behind, and was in among the mountains and the buttes. The rain and wind drove wildly through the gorges, and, with his hat pulled down over his brows, he bent his head and galloped along, always listening. The wind was against him, and he knew that he would hear any betraying sound in advance of him long before the desperadoes would be able to detect the beat of his own pony's feet.

Beauty was running at his top speed. His home was at Richardson's ranch on Horse Shoe Creek, and he was making for that destination without need of guidance or urging. But when he came into the dark solitudes of White Eagle Gulch, his step altered, and even in the darkness Kiddie knew that his ears were twitching restlessly. He drew rein, understanding the meaning of these signs.

"Steady, Beauty!" he said, as the pony slackened pace. He had himself caught the sound of hoofs echoing through the gulch, whose steep walls rose to mountainous heights at either side, leaving but a narrow, winding trail between. The highwaymen were riding at an easy trot, and presently they stopped.

Had they heard him? Were they now lurking behind some rock to fire upon him as he approached, to pounce upon him and his pony when he should fall? Kiddie had known instances when road agents, waylaying an unsuspecting rider in this way, had robbed and killed and scalped him, leaving him lying upon the trail as Indians would have left him.

"Guess I ain't goin' to turn back, anyhow," Kiddie resolved. He knew that his enemies were very near. He knew, too, that their first purpose, after having disabled or killed him, would be to seize his two saddle pouches, where they would expect to find the money. Dared he chance making a dash for it? This was tremendously hazardous; for they were no doubt good shots. They would post themselves at the side of the trail in positions which would enable them to see him against the faint light of the sky behind him, while their own forms would be hidden from him.

His plan of action was swiftly determined. Though it would almost surely cost him the life of his pony, yet, by

adopting it, he would almost as surely save the dollars that he carried—and his own life.

He hitched his bridle to the cantle in front of him, and loosened his feet from the stirrups.

“Wo, Beauty!” he bent over to whisper. The pony stopped, and Kiddie slipped noiselessly to the ground. “Go! go!” he then called, giving him a slap on his hind quarters.

Such an order when there were no rider’s knees pressing his sides, and neither corral nor stable near, was unusual; but Beauty seemed to comprehend, and he dashed off, leaving Kiddie alone in the darkness and the driving rain. The boy waited for a few moments, and then ran after him—ran swiftly, silently in his moccasined feet, drawing his revolver as he went.

Before he expected it, he heard a shot, then another. Of the second one he saw the flash, hardly a score of yards in front of him, low down, showing that the man who fired it was crouched on the ground.

“Guess he’s thrown,” he heard Barney exclaim. “I figured he was too young for the job. Stop that pony! Quick!”

The sounds that immediately followed told Kiddie that Beauty had been seized, and was resisting the rough handling that the rogues were giving him.

Silently, stealthily as an Indian, he climbed the slope of the rocky wall, and made his way among the bushes and boulders until he was abreast of the two desperadoes. He looked down upon them over the edge of a high rock. One of them had opened a dark lantern. By its light he could see the other standing at Beauty’s head, holding the bridle with one hand, while, with the other, he was busily trying to unbuckle the forward saddle pouch.

“Beauty ain’t killed, anyway,” reflected Kiddie, “and they won’t harm him now, I calculate.”

The moving lantern flashed for an instant along the shining wet trail, and upon the side of a piebald pony that stood patiently waiting where it had been left when its rider dismounted to walk back into his place of ambush. Kiddie had contemplated having to run the rest of his way to Horse

Shoe Creek on foot ; but now he saw a more agreeable possibility. Creeping among the dripping bushes, climbing from rock to rock, he regained the level trail so silently that even the piebald broncho did not hear him, for it gave a nervous start when he put his hand upon its shoulder. Kiddie mounted to the saddle with a practised horseman's agility, seized the bridle, and again took out his pistol.

Even yet the two desperadoes had not been alarmed, and for an instant or two Kiddie watched them. In the light of their lantern they were kneeling with their backs towards him, opening the first of the two saddle pouches. He heard Barney exclaim at finding that it was empty. He wished that he might rescue Beauty ; but, if this was impossible, he could at least give the two rascals a fright. Taking steady aim at their lantern, he fired two shots in quick succession. His bullets both struck their mark, but almost before the lantern toppled over, extinguished, he had dug in his spurs, and was galloping off, giving a wild Indian yell that echoed and re-echoed weirdly through the darkness of the gulch.

On and on through the sinuous ravine he sped. The desperadoes still had two ponies, if they chose to use Beauty ; but even though they should realise that he had outwitted them and that the coveted dollars were in his possession, it was not likely that they would give chase on such a night of drenching rain. Furthermore, there were but three or four miles between him and the safety of Richardson's camp at Horse Shoe Creek.

There, during the few moments while he was changing the piebald broncho for one of the regulation Express ponies, he gave information against Barney and his companion, and had the satisfaction of knowing that Tony Richardson intended at once to send out a party of his boys in pursuit. That same night Barney and Charlie were captured before they got as far as Hot Springs, and identified as the perpetrators of a peculiarly brutal affair at a lonely ranch on the Niobrara River. Their offence in White Eagle Gulch was small in comparison, and Kiddie was not required to give evidence against them when they were duly brought to justice for the greater crime.

"The skunk called me a tenderfoot," he complained to Tony Richardson as he mounted, munching a dry biscuit.

"Reckon I'll give him tenderfoot if I find he's done any sort of harm to Beauty," said Tony. "Well, so long, boy. My respec's and congratillations to friend Gideon."

Kiddie's further ride was along the lonely, rain-swept trail by the North Platte River, which he crossed at Old Richard's Bridge. He changed mounts again at Red Buttes, and thence went on, fording La Prell Creek and Deer Creek in turn, passing the great Independence Rock and Devil's Gate as the rain ceased, and dashing through One Tree Gulch by the light of a watery moon. He was riding as an extra, and was not expected at the various relay stations along the trail, and the relays were not always waiting for him; but usually the drumming of hoofs had been heard from afar, and a fresh steed took the place of the weary one. The hardened, well-trained animals did their respective sections on time, and, in spite of many delays, he sighted the familiar Sweetwater as dawn was breaking over the mountains in the east; and at seven o'clock in the morning he was handing the two thousand five hundred dollars to Gideon Birkenshaw, having fulfilled his promise to himself and Sheriff Blagg to cover the two hundred miles inside of twelve hours.

"Guess I c'n do with a chunk of that cold bacon, Mee-Mee, and a drink of new milk," he said, as he lifted his dripping face from the pail of water in which he had plunged it. "Then I'll turn into my bunk; for I'm some tired. Kind of feel as if I could sleep seven hours on end. But don't you allow me to miss the fam'ly dinner, else you'll just know what a man thinks when he's hungry."

"Say, Kiddie," said Abe Harum, regarding him from the top of the verandah steps, the while he sniffed at the business end of one of the boy's revolvers that he had deposited on the plank table. "Have you had occasion to make use of this here shootin'-iron since you've been on yer travels into the east? I kind of figure there's two cartridges here have done their dooty, and I'm goin' ter throw them out. Seen any more Injuns knockin' around?"

Kiddie looked up at him from the folds of the towel with which he was drying his face and hair.

"No," he answered. "Ain't see an Injun since I left home. There was a skunk in Brierley's saloon presumed to call me a tenderfoot——" He broke off, looking round for the soap.

"Scat my cats!" exclaimed Abe. "You went inter that low down emporium, where the drinks is nothin' else'n double distilled p'ison! I don't notion any tenderfoot leanin' his elbows on Dan Brierley's bar-counter. Nat'rally, bein' kind of hasty-tempered, you resented the skunk's imputation. Didn't I make the observation the other night that you was handy with the gun? The man that draws on you 'fore you've covered him's got ter be some quick, I guess."

Abe threw the two spent cartridges into the midst of the fowls that were pecking at the crumbs Mee-Mee had just emptied from a breakfast plate.

"Say, Kiddie," he resumed, "I'm curious to hear about that thar skunk that called you a tenderfoot. Did yer—did yer put his light out? . . ."

Kiddie permitted himself to smile, thinking of the lantern he had extinguished.

"That's just what I did do, Abe," he answered. "But not quite in the way you mean."

CHAPTER XIV

LIGHT ON A MYSTERY

“ GIDEON ? ”

“ Well, Kiddie ? I’ve suspicioned for an hour past that you’d suthin’ kind of important you hankered to talk about ; but didn’t care to hurry you any, knowin’ of old your habit of silence. I calculate it’s the Injun blood in you makes you the same as the Redskin medicine men—allus slow to give tongue, but wondrous wise when you do onburden yer mind. What is it ? I’m a listenin’.”

Kiddie was mending a thumb of one of his buckskin riding gloves, sitting near Gideon on the verandah steps. He dexterously threaded his needle, and bit off a length of cotton with his sharp, even teeth.

“ Don’t know as it’s anyways important,” he said in a tone of indifference. “ You don’t ‘pear to understand that I think very slowly. I take a consid’rable time to place things in their proper order.”

“ Well,” said Gideon, puffing meditatively at his pipe. “ This yer shanty ain’t the House of Representatives at Washington, and I guess you ain’t shapin’ to make an election oration, anyway.”

“ D’you remember tellin’ me that, when the warrior brought me along that night, fourteen year back, to your dug-out on the North Platte, you mentioned somethin’ about the buttons that were on my pants—said they’d the name of a London tailor on them, didn’t you ? ”

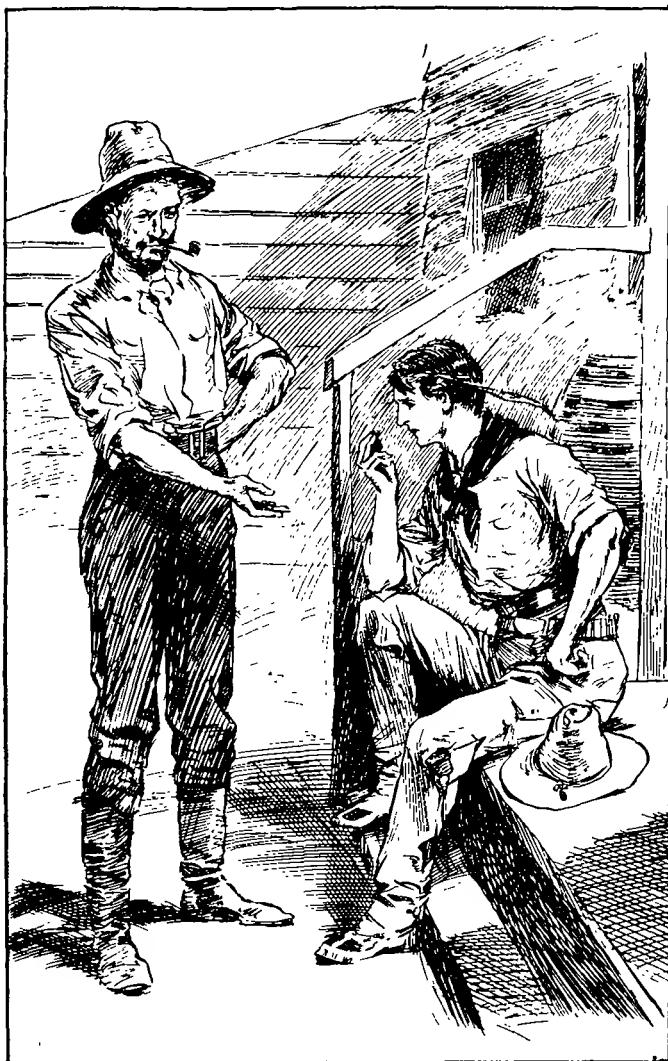
Gideon spat far out over the verandah rail.

“ You got a notion you’d like to see ‘em ? ” he asked.

Kiddie nodded, with his eyes still on his work.

“ Shouldn’t mind, if they’re anyways handy,” he answered. Gideon laid his pipe on the bench, stood up, and went in-





Gideon held out four brass buttons in the palm of his hand.

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doors. Presently he returned, and held out four brass buttons in the palm of his hand. Kiddie picked up one of them, and examined it.

"Um!" he grunted. "Kind of high-class tailor, I should guess, by the address—Bond Street, W. I've read about it. A street where the fashionable stores are located. I calculate they'd charge a heap of dollars for a gentleman's outfit. And you say these here buttons were sewn on my little pants when Eye-of-the-Moon brought me along, eh?"

"That's so," returned Gideon. "But I reckon the pants wasn't made in Bond Street, W. Guess I could have made as shapely a pair myself, give me the cloth. I'd say the fingers that made them was more accustomed to makin' beaded moccasins than little boys' knickerbockers. You'd a real pretty pair of moccasins on your feet, but Eye-of-the-Moon notioned to keep them, for the sake of the beads, I guess. He didn't figure to leave anythin' of value with you. And that reminds me, Kiddie; what about that there bronze token with the gold chain, and the beads?"

Kiddie looked at him.

"I told you I'd sold it to Buckskin Jack," he answered. "Buck kind of fancied it, and five dollars looked a heap of money to me. Never owned so much in my life before."

"I don't say 'twasn't a good bargain," Gideon remarked, taking up his pipe and laying the four buttons on the windowsill. "Certainly the bronze token wasn't worth more'n five cents; the beads about the same value, and the chain—wal, I guess you'd get as good a one brand new in St. Louis for five dollars, now that gold's so plentiful. I hear they're turnin' it up in shovelfuls at them Black Hill mines, where everybody's rushin' to."

Kiddie moved restlessly at this digression. He had not at that moment any interest in the Black Hill mines.

"Eye-of-the-Moon came to you from down east that night, didn't he?" he pursued. "Winter time, wasn't it?"

Gideon nodded twice.

"And you never heard what ranches he'd been raidin' just about that time?"

"Guess I weren't in the way of hearin' anythin' from any-

where away in the wilderness, where I was existin' then," responded the boss. " You're a-follerin' up of the trail pretty close. Any other questions ? "

" Heaps," said Kiddie. " I want to know just where your dug-out was located, for one thing."

Gideon scratched his ear.

" If we'd sech a convenient article as a map of the State of Colorado, I've a notion I could about put my finger on it," he replied. " Wantin' a map, I can only say it was on one of the small creeks on the head waters of the North Platte. Lonesome Gideon's Creek, I called it ; but the Lonesome's been dropped by the later trappers."

" West of Laramie ? " observed Kiddie.

" Certainly." Gideon took his pipe from his lips, and looked at his companion curiously. " Have you an idea back of your head that he'd come from thereabouts ? 'Tain't anyways unlikely. There were two or three ranches along the Little River them days—ranches and trappers' shanties."

" Ever hear the name of the men that kept any of them ? " Kiddie inquired.

" Well," returned the boss, " they wasn't exactly neighbours, livin' all that way off, and no wonder I never heard their names."

" That's a pity," reflected Kiddie. " Because I heard somethin' in Brierley's saloon—somethin' that's set me thinkin'. And, puttin' that alongside of what Isa Blagg told me, I've come to the conclusion that the place where Eye-of-the-Moon brought me from was Fritton's Ranch, on the Little Laramie."

" Fritton ! " exclaimed Gideon. " The man whose name was on the bronze medal ? The man Lawyer Severn's been lookin' for ? Him that's a lord without knowin' it ? Say, Kiddie, you ought to have stuck to that there medal. 'Twould have been a heap more valuable than them buttons."

Kiddie stood up beside the boss, who was now smoking his pipe with unusual energy.

" What's your notion ? " he questioned, looking into Gideon's meditative blue eyes.

For a long time Gideon was silent : but Kiddie knew that

he was seriously figuring up the problem, from the fact that his finger-tips were nervously tapping the back of the bench on which he leaned.

"What's my notion?" he repeated, clearing his throat. "Wal, it's a notion that's been takin' shape in this yer brain of mine for a day or two back, troublin' me amazingly—ever since that English lawyer man happened along. And this information you've just given me—these facts, I may say, for you ain't the one to voice an idea 'fore you're pooty sure—this information only props up my inf'rance, and I figure that inf'rance is just about the same's your own."

He paused, wiped the palm of his right hand on his knee, and held the hand out to Kiddie.

"Guess you'll allow old Gid ter be the first ter congratulate you," he said, and his voice, usually firm, trembled a little. "Bein' a citizen of the United States, I'll not take off my hat t'you; but—shake!"

Kiddie drew back.

"Say—you mean——"

"What d'you suppose I could mean," returned Gideon, "but that you're the son of this Captain Fritton—this missing Earl St. Olave—and the heir to a pile of dollars and estates away in England? More," he went on, "if Captain Fritton's dead, as I believe he is, you are yourself Lord St. Olave. That's what I mean."

"No, no!" cried Kiddie. "Don't say that, Gid. Don't say that. You've got no right to. I'm only Kiddie—Kiddie of the Camp, here—Kiddie, the Pony Express rider. There ain't any proof, none at all. D'yous reckon, because I had that Victoria Cross slung around my neck when Eye-of-the-Moon brought me along that winter night, fourteen years ago, that I'm the son of an English nobleman? There ain't enough to go upon in that. The medal might have been lost years before the raid. It might have been in a score of diff'rent hands 'fore it came into mine."

"Likely," nodded the boss. "But don't you fergit the buttons. I guess they may be taken as what the newspapers call c'roborative evidence."

"I ain't so sure," pursued Kiddie. "Allowin' that my

mother was a squaw woman, she might easily have gotten the buttons off some old garment that had b'longed to Captain Fritton."

Gideon smiled at the boy's incredulity.

"Your mother's name was Pine Leaf, you told me," he went on—"the romantic sort of name that's given to the daughters of chiefs and warriors; and, if your mother made them moccasins you wore, I reckon she was no ord'nary squaw, but a woman of elegant taste, and I'm ready to gamble this yer ranch agin a pea nut that she was uncommon good-lookin'!"

"The name of Captain Fritton's wife was Pine Leaf," Kiddie said gently. "Isa Blagg told me. She was killed during the same raid. Seems Rube knew all about her."

"Then how in thunder c'n you expect better proof?" questioned Gideon. "Guess that same Lady Pine Leaf would have been Countess of St. Olave—if Countess is the regulation title for the wife of an earl."

"I've a notion it is," said Kiddie. "Guess an earl's pretty high up in the social scale, and his wife's sure to be somethin' more'n a lady. But I ain't got the hang o' these aristocratic distinctions. They're some puzzlin'."

"You'll have the hang of 'em pat enough, one of these days, I figure," mused Gideon, "when you're a real live aristocratic lord yourself. And then you'll forget poor old Gideon Birkenshaw, and his ranch away here on the Sweetwater, and the ponies in the corral, and Laramie Peak yonder, with its cap of snow, and this yer verandah, where we've had so many a companionable pow-wow together. You'll quit and clean forget 'em all."

"Nay, I shan't," protested Kiddie; "I ain't goin' to quit. I ain't goin' to leave you, Gid. 'Tain't just kind of you to suspect it."

Gideon Birkenshaw sighed.

"Guess you've got to send a letter right away to the lawyer, to get on his trail 'fore he leaves New York," he recommended, "and tell him you're the heir he's been lookin' for."

Kiddie shook his head with determination.

"I ain't shapin' to do anythin' of the sort," he said. "If

I'd got on the track of Lord St. Olave, and could produce him, I'd write. But I ain't goin' to push myself forward any, you bet."

Gideon stood up, leaned with his folded arms on the verandah rail, and spat.

"Do you mind tellin' me just why?" he asked. "Ain't you the legal heir? Ain't you the son of Captain Fritton, born in lawful wedlock, as they say? Why, now?"

"Because," returned Kiddie, "I ain't fit. A good half of me is Red Indian. Do you notion I could hold up my head among thoroughbred English aristocrats, and wear a gold coronet in their House of Lords? How should I, an ignorant, half-caste mongrel, notion to rub shoulders as an equal with born gentlemen that have been educated at Eton and Harrow, Cambridge and Oxford?"

"Git!" said the boss, in a tone of disgust. "You allus had too small an opinion of yourself, Kiddie. You ain't fit, you say? Then who is, I'd like t' know? You're fit for anythin' you put your mind to, I guess."

"Yes, here in Wyoming," agreed Kiddie. "But in civilised England——" He shook his head. "No, Gid, old man, I ain't goin' to leave you, don't you fear. You've brought me up in your own honest way; you've done well by me—been a real father to me all along, and I ain't a-goin' to leave you for no earldom and no fortune."

Gideon emptied his pipe. "Don't you be so everlastin' foolish," said he, "but go right now, and send a letter to the lawyer. You're the rightful heir, I make no doubt, and, if you ain't goin' to foller the thing up, who is?"

"Why, the next on turn, to be sure," Kiddie answered promptly. "Thar's a young chap over there named Harold Fritton; was schoolfellow at Eton with Geoffrey Severn—captain of their house eleven, an awfully nice chap, Geoff told me, and a rippin' bowler. Them's Geoff's own words. He's the next heir, and I reckon I ain't goin' to stand in his way. He's a born aristocratic gentleman, he is, and would be a real credit to the title, while as for me—well, I just ain't fit."

He strolled away in the direction of the whispering river.

As he was about to cross the trail, a horseman rattled past him.

“ Buck ! Buck ! ” cried the boy.

But Buckskin Jack only waved his hand and rode on.

Kiddie watched him until he disappeared, little dreaming how soon and in what a strange situation of desperate peril he was to see him next.

CHAPTER XV

SCOUT BY NECESSITY

KIDDIE had many a thrilling adventure during the brief period in which he acted as a rider in the Pony Express, and, if he seldom came to disaster or failed to deliver his packets of letters on time, this was mainly because he was careful to avoid unnecessary danger. Neither he nor his pony was handicapped by carrying anything superfluous. A knife and two revolvers were deemed sufficient for his protection, without a rifle, which would have been but an added burden. His rain cape of light material was rolled into the smallest possible compass at the cantle in front of his saddle. Even his cases of precious letters made a bundle no larger than an ordinary writing tablet. The letters or despatches to be conveyed across the continent were required to be written on the finest tissue paper, and five dollars were paid in advance on every letter ; so that there was no frivolous and needless correspondence. Every letter was of urgent political or commercial importance, and there were hundreds of them, sometimes.

The mail bags were two leather pouches, impervious to rain, sealed, and strapped to the rider's saddle before and behind. They were never to contain over twenty pounds in weight. As he arrived at each relay station, they were whipped off, and transferred to a fresh pony while the rider was remounting.

Kiddie had never tried to break any record. As the youngest rider on the trail, he could not hope to excel such famous horsemen as Pony Bob, or Will Cody, or Harry Roff. He was content if he did his simple duty and accomplished his trip within schedule time. He did some wonderful riding,

nevertheless. On one occasion, when, as an "extra hand," he found himself at Midway Station, in Western Nebraska, a very important Government despatch for the Pacific coast arrived. Kiddie was commissioned to take it westward. Mounting his pony, he sped on to Julesburg, 140 miles away, and he got every inch of speed out of his various mounts. At Julesburg, he met another important despatch for Washington. The rider who should have carried it east had been scalped by Redskins the day before, and, although Kiddie was not on his own division, he was ready. After a rest of only seven minutes, and without eating a meal, he started back for Midway, and he made the round trip, 280 miles, in fifteen hours and twenty minutes. He afterwards heard that the west-bound despatch reached Sacramento from St. Joseph—a distance of nearly 2000 miles—in eight days, nine hours, and forty minutes.

For his own safety, and the safety of the little packets of letters he carried, Kiddie was bound of necessity to be continually watchful of the signs of danger that lay in his path. You must not suppose that the Great Salt Lake Trail, along which he travelled, was a made track, straightly cut, fenced in, and kept in repair by road menders, or that there was a bridge over every turbulent stream. When there was much traffic, a rough sort of track across the plains and mountains was, indeed, kept open through the rank herbage or the deep sand by the feet of many horses and the heavy wheels of bull waggons and prairie schooners; but often the trail was overgrown with grass, or hidden under drifts of prairie dust, or wreaths of snow, and most of the rivers such as the North Platte and the Sweetwater had to be forded, even when in flood.

Kiddie, of course, could find his way across the prairie by the stars; for, like most persons who live in large solitudes, he was familiar with the spangled features of the midnight sky, and he could roughly tell the time by the moon and the planets, as well as by the sun. If the air was clear, the mountain ranges and the well-known landmarks of rock and tree and stream afforded ample guidance; but more than once he had been lost, and had had to determine his course

across the pitch-black plains by trusting to the direction of the wind, and to worry through a dense fog by observing the petals of the golden rod—a prairie plant, whose feathered plumes point faithfully to the north. Nor did he neglect to trust in the wise instincts of his horse.

His own senses were peculiarly acute ; his bodily condition was perfect. He had the good digestion and the clear skin of one who lives constantly on wholesome, simple fare, and neither smokes nor drinks. His muscles were like bands of steel. His hands were never known to tremble. His strong and even teeth were without a flaw, and no buffalo meat was too tough for him. So sharp were his ears that he could hear Gideon Birkenshaw's watch ticking when it was in the old man's pocket at the far corner of the large room. Gideon, indeed, had once declared that he "could fairly hear the grass a-growin'." As for his eyesight, he could distinguish the little papoose on the back of the squaw star in the constellation of the Dipper, or Great Bear, as we call it, and that is a test to which only the very strongest sight is equal.

These natural faculties, like his powers of memory, and his sense of smell, were, no doubt, improved by their continual exercise. It was a part of his very life to pay regard to the little things which many persons would pass by unnoticed ; wherefore, he, for example, became wise in weather lore, knowing how to foretell rain or snow or a fine day by the appearance of the sky, the clearness or obscurity of the mountain ridges, the movements of birds, beasts, and insects, the condition of the herbage, and the alternations of the wind's direction. Often, when forced by lurking dangers to make a long detour through trackless wilds, he found his direction by noticing the moss on the north side of trees or rocks, or by observing the branches of isolated pines, which grew in greater abundance on the side least exposed to the north winds. At times, in order to find his way back through unfamiliar forests, he had recourse to the Indians' plan of blazing a trail ; but it was not often that he had need to seek a trail of his own previous making, for he knew the value of looking backward to take in the features that he must recognise on his return.

The necessity of safeguarding himself and the mail against prowling Redskins made him exceedingly sharp also in observing Indian signs. It required constant alertness on his part to detect the near presence of savages, who were experts in cunning, and subterfuge, and deception. Their skill in taking cover and their patient waiting in ambush was the undoing of many a hardened frontiersman, and their artfulness in adapting themselves and their horses to the colour of their surroundings was comparable only with the natural adaptability of the chameleon. In the spring-time their scouts and warriors on the war-path would paint themselves and their ponies and trappings green, making themselves indistinguishable amid the fresh verdure of brush and brake. In autumn they assumed the more sombre colouring of the sage brush ; and Kiddie had seen bands of marauding braves crossing the prairies in winter time, when everything about them was white, their horses, their blankets, leggings, moccasins, faces, hands, and hair ; the deception being so complete that at a distance of a thousand yards it was difficult even for his sharp eyes to follow their movements against the background of snow.

It was important for him to know whether or not it was safe for him to venture through some particular cañon or narrow defile. Certain signs, as that the tracks he saw were those of unshod horses, would assure him that Indians had entered in advance of him, and he learned to discover, by the condition of the trail, how long ago they had passed, if they were going quick or slow, if the party was large or small, whether they were on the war-path or merely migrating with their camp impediments, and whether more Indians were likely to follow and so cut off his retreat.

If the party that had gone along were to be followed by others of their divided band, while they endeavoured to wipe out their tracks, or, at least, to hide the indications of their number by riding on the grass in single file, they still left some intentional signs as messages to their friends in their rear. They would tie a knot in a tuft of grass, training the loose blades as a pointer, or place a few stones or twigs on the side of the trail in positions to indicate their prospective route,

to give warning of danger, to tell of success or of failure, or to give directions for future action. Kiddie learned how to read these signs, just as he learned to read the crude picture writings on the Indian teepees, and to know the meaning of signal smokes, or to tell by the dead ashes of their camp-fires how long ago the nomadic savages had quitted a resting-place.

At the time when he started in the Express business the Indians were more than usually troublesome along the Sweetwater. They had little respect for the United States Government, and less still for the laws which endeavoured to keep them within the frontier lines of their own reservations.

The only enemies they feared were the cavalry soldiers stationed at the military forts of Laramie, Leavenworth, and Bridger, and, not understanding the meaning of written letters and the system of express postage, they could only suppose that a rider galloping at top pace along the trail was a scout carrying information of their own movements.

"Thar's Injun signs about; so keep your eyes open," said the station boss at Split Rock one day as Kiddie was changing ponies.

"'Twas me that reported 'em, boss," said Kiddie. "I'm on the watch, you bet."

His way ran through a grim wild, darkened by mountains, overhung with rugged cliffs, and fringed with giant pine trees, and, as he clattered down the twilit track, each gloomy chasm and sheltering rock was searched by busy eyes for signs of a hidden foe. An isolated boulder lay in clear view far in front of him down the steep ravine, and for a fleeting second he saw a dark object move along its upper ridge.

It might have been mistaken for a bird or a squirrel, but Kiddie had already observed a school of crows flying startled from the tree tops, and his sharpened senses were alert. He kept on his course until within rifle-shot of the boulder, and then abruptly swerved in an oblique line from the trail. The ambush had failed, as he knew by the puff of smoke that curled above the rock. Bending forward, he glanced aside over his shoulder, and saw two braves spring out in gorgeous war paint, with their guns levelled in his direction. At the same

moment a score of whooping Indians rode out of the timber on the further side of the valley, and gave chase.

In advance of him the mountains converged to a narrow cañon. If he could reach that narrow pass uninjured, the mails would be safe. But the mounted savages did not mean him to escape, and their ponies were fresh. He heard them behind him, they were gaining upon him, and their chief was hardly a bow-shot in his rear. As they neared the pass, Kiddie realised that it was a matter of life against life, and he thought of Rube Carter's tragic fate. But he knew well that no mounted Indian could take true aim with the rifle at a running target, and so, taking his choice of two evils, he set his horse to a gallop.

The boy's flight was the signal for a shower of arrows. One grazed Kiddie's hat, another passed under his uplifted arm, and he heard a third plunge its point into his pony's buttock. But in a few more moments he was beyond range of the shafts.

"Guess there's a bunch of Cheyennes foolin' around down east in Grey Wolf," he reported at the next relay station, when the boss was examining the wounded pony. "Yes, the pony'll need doctorin'. I'll take the arrow along with me if you don't mind. I'm collectin' them for a chap that has a fancy for this kind of thing." He paused with his foot in the stirrup. "Say, boss," he said, "don't you neglect ter warn folks about them Injuns I mentioned?"



The boy's flight was the signal for a shower of arrows.

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CHAPTER XVI

ON THE WAR-PATH

No doubt, the station boss duly warned all eastward-bound travellers ; but such warnings were not always heeded, or, if heeded, they did not necessarily protect the people who received them from attack.

Two mornings afterwards, Kiddie was riding westward along the same line, from his starting-place near Red Buttes, when, by the light of early dawn, he observed something unusual on the trail—something which assured him long before he came up to it that there had been a serious battle with Indians. From afar he distinguished two wrecked coaches lying side by side athwart the trail, with here and there a dead horse, here and there a dead man, and round about them a confused litter of bits of white paper that fluttered like birds in the morning breeze. He slowed down, for caution's sake, but, so far as he could make out, there was no living creature near, and again he galloped forward, only coming to a halt in the midst of the wreckage.

"Shouldn't wonder if it was the same band of Cheyennes that started this racket," he said to himself, dismounting and bidding his obedient pony stand still. "Ah, you don't like the woeful sound you're listenin' to, do you ? No, no more do I." He went round to the farther side of the coaches, and there, beside two dead Indians, he found a horse moaning in agony. The poor animal's near hind leg had got jammed and torn among the spokes of the heavy back wheel. Kiddie took out his revolver, pointed it at a vital spot, pulled the trigger, and the horse ceased to moan.

He saw that the wheel had ploughed a deep furrow in the sand, and this told him that the horse had fallen and got its leg between the spokes while the coach was still moving.

Very deliberately he went about examining the wreckage, and piecing together, bit by bit, incident by incident, the story of the fight. The dead were all Indians—Cheyennes. Nine of them he counted.

He was perplexed at first by the positions and the condition of the two coaches. They were completely riddled with arrows and bullets, and every vestige of leather, straps, and cushions was stripped off them. And from each of them the front wheels of the running gear were missing. He could see them nowhere. The track showed that the coaches had been travelling eastward, and it was clear that at the time of the attack they had designedly been run alongside of each other, as they now stood, across the trail. Between the wheels there was now a mixed-up mass of loose sand and papers. The papers, as he had recognised from the first, had been the contents of the heavy mail sacks. Valuable letters, bank cheques, and bills for large amounts of money were scattered about the ground ; but of the sacks that had held them there was no sign. The twelve coach horses lay dead, and there were fourteen dead Indian ponies.

Having examined the debris, Kiddie exercised his scoutcraft in forming a theory as to how the affair had happened, from beginning to end.

To begin with, his knowledge of the traffic on the trail helped him considerably. The two mail coaches belonged to his own employers. A driver's whip that he found was marked with the initials, "L. F.," which were those of a man well known to him, named Lem Flowers. And if Lem was in charge of the outfit, then Jimmy Brown would be most certainly the conductor, for Jimmy and Lem were inseparable. He estimated that the marks of the wheels and the footprints of the horses were not less than twelve hours old ; the impressions were not sharp ; the wind had rounded their edges, even before the heavy night dew had moistened them. The blood on the sandy surface had been covered with dust, which also must have got there before the dew arrested its drifting. The fight, therefore, took place during the previous afternoon, later than two o'clock, because he himself had ridden along here at that hour, and he had not over-

taken the coaches on the way. The trail of the Indians showed that they had approached at a gallop across the plain obliquely from behind Split Rock. Their band, he judged, had numbered about thirty, and the white party could not have been more than ten, assuming that there had been a full complement of passengers.

The horse which he had just put out of its misery had apparently been one of the leaders in the foremost coach. It had been cut with a tomahawk above the left knee, had fallen, and been dragged along, struggling until, the traces breaking as the coach swerved, it had got its leg between the spokes, and jammed the wheel. The white defenders had then been so harassed by the fire from the Redskins' rifles and arrows that they had been compelled to run the two coaches side by side, pile the mail sacks between the wheels, and throw sand over them for breastwork. From this barricade they must have fought the savages through the rest of the afternoon. Several of them had been disabled. If they had not been, Kiddie argued, the Indians would not have been permitted to strip the coaches and rifle the mail sacks. These latter they had emptied, and they had carried away the coveted canvas, discarding the letters and the paper money, of which they did not know the value. Nine dead Indians were here to show how many of their band had been killed, and the survivors must have departed in a hurry, or they would have taken away their dead. There was blood on the track of their retreat, telling that some of them were severely wounded.

And now, Kiddie asked himself, what had become of the front wheels of the two coaches? And where were the white defenders?

These questions puzzled him not a little until he went back along the trail and examined it a second time. There, sure enough, he found the impressions of the two pairs of detached wheels. In the general kick up he had not at first observed them, or he had not gone far enough to see where they came off the grass. But further along they were clearly defined, as though they had gone upon ground already moistened by the dew after nightfall, and between each pair there were the

impressions of white men's boots. Four men had walked, evidently pushing the wheels before them with difficulty, for the toes were deeper than the heels.

And where were the companions of these four men, Kiddie, wondered?

The answer was obvious. They were lying wounded on the axle-gear, and were being wheeled back west to the Three Crossings of the Sweetwater.

Before he started off again from this scene of battle Kiddie lingered to collect some of the fugitives' letters, and bury them under a pile of sand for subsequent recovery. Six miles further on he overtook Lem Flowers and his fellow survivors, with their slowly moving conveyances, and learned that his deductions were correct in every particular, excepting that there had been nine, instead of ten, white men engaged, and that one of them, Jimmy Brown, had been killed and not merely wounded.

Three of the passengers were miners from California. They had been on their way to the Black Hills, where gold had recently been found in considerable quantities.

It was this same discovery of gold which led to the outbreak of the Sioux war, and, as Kiddie subsequently acted as a professional scout in the military operations against the great Sitting Bull and Eye-of-the-Moon, Crazy Horse, and Spotted Tail, it is necessary to explain the origin of the war.

It was really due to a breach of faith on the part of the United States Government. A treaty had been made with the Sioux nation, by which the district of the Black Hills was reserved exclusively for their use. Within certain prescribed limits of territory they were to enjoy full liberty to live and hunt as they desired, without disturbance, and it was a provision of the treaty that no white men were to be permitted to settle within the Indian reserves, or to trap beaver, or hunt buffalo, or to molest or interfere with the Redskins in any way. At the same time, the Government supplied the Indians with vast quantities of improved firearms and ammunition. Just before the outbreak of the war, indeed, Sitting Bull had received between three and four thousand new Remington and Winchester rifles, over a million rounds of patent ammuni-

tion, and many cases of Sheffield-made knives ; and, having furnished him and his intrepid fighting men with suitable weapons, the Government straightway provided them with a rich excuse for using them against the whites.

When gold was discovered by a party of trespassing trappers among the Black Hills, the usual gold fever broke out, and there was a wild rush of white men into the Indian country. Almost every day Kiddie and other riders in the Pony Express would see long trains of prospectors winding across Laramie Plains towards the mountain streams, where the gold had been found. From west, and east, and south, they came with their washing pans and their picks and shovels, all bent upon finding an easy fortune, lighting their camp fires and starting their mines in the very midst of the Indian reservations.

Very naturally, the Sioux resented this intrusion. If the white men did not respect the conditions of the treaty, neither would they. So, on their own part, they broke bounds. They raided peaceful camps like Birkenshaw's and Westrop's, they attacked bull waggons and mail coaches, and waylaid the Pony Express riders. Then the Government sent military expeditions into the Black Hill country, not to expel the intruders, as, according to the terms of the treaty, they ought to have done, but with instructions to intimidate the Indians into submission, and to induce them to permit the miners to occupy the gold-producing lands.

The result of this continued bad faith was inevitable. Everywhere the Sioux rose in arms. They danced the terrible sun-dance, which was their old-time preliminary to going on the war-path ; they practised rifle-shooting, held pow-wows, elected additional chiefs, sent out their scouts in all directions, and made horse raids wherever horses were to be stolen.

“ Seems to me the hull policy of the Government's wrong,” said Gideon Birkenshaw one night in late autumn, when he and his boys sat round the fire having a big talk. “ I ain't no friend of the Redskins. I've seen too much of 'em for that, and the more I see of 'em the more I like white men. I gucss we've made 'em what they are. Time I first came out west, when I was 'bout the age of Kiddie thar, we could go

among 'em and come to no harm. Our scalps were safe. But they ain't the same as they used to be, and it's our own all-fired fault. What have we done for 'em ? "

"Heaps," muttered Abe Harum. "A sight more'n they've deserved."

Gideon emptied his mug of hot coffee.

"We've demoralised them," he said emphatically, "made brute beasts of 'em ; that's what we've done, I reckon. We've come here and occupied the country that was theirs 'fore the time of Christopher Columbus and George Washington. We've robbed them of the buffalo. There ain't one of us here too young to remember the time when the plains were just black with buffalo. Thousands upon thousands of 'em used to graze outside our dooryard here. But now you've got to search 'fore you can see a decent herd."

"Guess I passed through a herd of about forty head a week back alongside of Butterfly Creek," said Kiddie.

"Dessay," nodded Gideon, "but we've 'most killed them all off. I've seen a herd that took twelve hours to pass out of sight going at a full stampede. Couldn't see the grass they were crossin', and the racket they made with their hoofs was the same as thunder. That was only one herd, but I reckon, if you was to round up every buffalo in the United States, you could pack the lot of 'em into our corral."

Abe Harum coughed incredulously.

"I allow there ain't enough of 'em left in a bunch to make a decent surround," he admitted, "but I calculate the Injuns themselves ain't been just idle in gettin' rid of them. They've done a considerable trade in robes."

"Sure," agreed Gideon. "But who bought the robes, Abe ? Who enticed the Redskins to slaughter more'n they needed for their own use ? The white men, I guess. And what did they give the Injuns in return ? Fire-water ! Doctored fire-water—the biggest all-fired curse that ever was invented for the ruination of red humanity."

"And white no less than red," added Kiddie, looking up from where he sat, on a long bench, cutting up tobacco for the men. "But what I'd just like to know is, how far is this here risin' of the Sioux goin' to interfere with the Pony Express ? "

Gideon leaned forward, and pushed a log of wood into the heart of the fire.

"If you're puttin' that very practical question to me in my capacity of station agent, Kiddie," he returned, always ready to listen to what Kiddie had to say, "I can only reply in that capacity that I ain't had any official communication on the subject. But, if you're askin' me kind of private and confidential—wal, I calculate it'll make a considerable difference. Thar's one thing pretty sure, an' that is that it ain't any longer safe for a rider to go along the trail alone."

"And have we got to sit idle while the soldiers are foolin' around all that time?" questioned Kiddie, rolling a handful of tobacco between his palms.

"I don't notion you'd sit idle, anyhow, Kiddie," Gideon smiled. "Why, no, I calculate you and Abe would be invited to go scoutin' in the service of the United States Army, the same as Frank Grouard and Buckskin Jack."

Kiddie dropped the tobacco into the jar, staring blankly at Gideon.

"Buckskin Jack?" he repeated. "You never told me that you'd heard of him. Where is he? Do you know? I'd give heaps to see him again—to ask him about Rube and Captain Fritton. Isa Blagg wants to see him, too. Say, what d'you know of him?"

Gideon Birkenshaw saw the light of eagerness in Kiddie's eyes, and again, as once before, there came into his loving heart the dreaded feeling of what it would mean to him if Kiddie should leave him, after all, and go away to far-off England to claim the fortune and title that were waiting for him. And a lump came into the old man's throat.

"What do I know of him?" he echoed dully, gazing into the fire. "I don't see that it matters. I only know that he's proved himself about the likeliest candidate for a lunatic asylum of any idiot man along the trail. Lem Flowers reckoned he'd seen him yesterday ridin' in a bee-line for the Black Hills, alone, though he must have known that there wasn't a ghost of a chance of his ever comin' out alive. Nor was there; not a ghost of a chance, there wasn't. This mornin' Lem was drivin' his coach across the mouth of Dead

Eagle Gulch, an' came slap upon Buck's pony, limpin' along, stripped of its saddle, an' its haunches spattered with blood."

Kiddie rose slowly to his feet. There was an expression of grim determination in his face as he took his rifle from its stand.

"I am going after him," he declared. "I must find him. Dead or alive, the man must be found!"

CHAPTER XVII

A FEW NEW FACTS

"Now, Mr. Severn, if you please, we'll get to business. You have something to tell me, I understand."

Harold Fritton had come up to town from Oxford, partly for a few days' relaxation after a hard grind, and partly to have a long-delayed consultation with the family lawyer, and he had invited Mr. Severn and Geoff to take dinner with him and his mother and sisters at their London house in Mount Street. Geoff Severn was home on long leave from Eton, and the invitation had, of course, been accepted. There were no other guests, and, when coffee had been served, and the men were left alone, the three of them drew their chairs to the hearth, with their feet on a fine buffalo robe, brought from Wyoming.

"Yes," returned Mr. Severn, lighting a cigar, "I have a few new facts, not important, perhaps; still, we cannot afford to neglect even the smallest items of information." He drew some papers from his pocket, and laid them beside his coffee cup. "I have a letter from a man in Wyoming—a man named Isa Blagg, the deputy sheriff of the Sweetwater district, of whom I have already spoken to you."

"He's the chap that acted as our guide when we went on our wild goose chase up the Little Laramie River," interposed Geoff.

"Don't interrupt," rebuked his father, "and," he went on, addressing his host, "there is also an old letter written years ago by your Uncle Reginald's friend, Reuben Carter, or, to give him his true name, Robert Cartwright."

"Ah!" Harold Fritton took up a cigarette. "Where did you get hold of it?"

"I discovered his sister," Mr. Severn explained. "She is a

Mrs. Hardcastle, who lives in Hampstead, a widow. Fortunately, she has preserved her brother's letters. I have seen most of them, but there is only one that is of any real value to us. First of all, however, I think we may consider the communication from Mr. Blagg. I wrote to him, you know; and this is his reply. Shall I read it to you? It's not much."

"Certainly," assented Fritton.

Mr. Severn opened the letter and read :

"DEAR SIR,

"Yours of the 14th received, and in reply I beg to say that I had not forgotten the matter of the English officer you came out to the States a while back to find. Fact, I have been scouting for his trail ever since the day your outfit went east from Fort Laramie. Reason I have not written to you before is that I have not had a whole lot to report to you. The said Captain Fritton appears to have been just as cute as any Rocky Mountain Redskin in wiping out his tracks, and I've got to confess right now that I haven't struck his trail yet, though I have availed myself of every opportunity to consult the oldest inhabitants of these plains according to your advice. I hope you will allow that this failure to track the missing gentleman is not due to any lack of vigilance on my part. But in these wilds, where the population is always on the move, the same as the brute beasts, it's not just easy to locate the oldest inhabitant anywhere, most of them being killed off by the Indians, or gone off on the Far Trail for other reasons. Sorry to report that I missed a great chance the same day that you went east, as I have discovered there was a man at Fort Laramie right then named William K. Lewell, who had ranched on the Little Laramie at the period in question, and is known to have been a neighbour of the English gentleman, although not on friendly terms with him. The said William K. Lewell was latterly in the road agent business, and, naturally, didn't notion to come anyways within the district in which yours truly holds jurisdiction, seeing that he correctly calculated I carried a warrant for his arrest. Five days after you and Mr. Geoff had gone east, he fell into the hands of Judge

Lynch, and I didn't arrive in time to cut the rope and secure the required information before he'd given in his checks.

"Following your advice, I have had an interview with the man known along the trail as Buckskin Jack, but got no information from him that bears upon the business of Captain Fritton. He had never made the acquaintance of Captain Fritton. His own name, for which you ask, is well known along the trail, and I'm some surprised you never heard it when you were here. It is John S. Arbuthnot, but, as it's long and kind of hard to say, we just call him Buckskin Jack. Time of the raid, he lived as a trapper at the foot of Laramie Peak, and, if Captain Fritton was known to him, I guess it was under another name.

"At the present, so far as I can make out, there is only one man living who can supply the required information, and that is the Sioux chief, Eye-of-the-Moon, who was the leader of the raid. But, as he don't speak English, as your son knows, and is death on all white men, an interview with him wouldn't be worth a whole lot.

"Trusting that Mr. Geoff and you are well, I remain, yours truly,

"Isa W. BLAGG,

"Deputy Sheriff, Sweetwater Co., Wy., U.S."

Mr. Severn laid the letter aside, and looked across at Harold Fritton.

"You see, that does not help us very much," he remarked.

"No," agreed Fritton, "excepting that he gives the name of the Indian who raided Uncle Reginald's ranch. But, surely, if the ranch itself has been identified, the owner's name must have been commonly known out there, even though it was not his true one?"

"So I should have thought," admitted Mr. Severn. "But that is the very thing that we cannot get hold of. Even Reuben Carter does not mention the assumed name, either in his statement, or in this letter to his sister."

"It seems to me that somebody ought to go out there again," put in Geoff.

"I've half a mind to go myself," added Harold Fritton. "It's no end of a pity that chap Carter didn't live a few days

longer. He could have put everything straight. As for the Indian chief, we could get at him through an interpreter."

"Why, of course we could," rejoined Geoff. "That chap, Kiddie of Birkenshaw's Camp, knows several of the Indian languages—colloquially, at all events."

"I didn't know before that any of them were anything else than colloquial," smiled Fritton, sipping his black coffee. He turned to the lawyer. "Let's have the other letter, Mr. Severn," he requested.

"There is only a section of it that affects the case," said Mr. Severn, biting the wet end of his cigar, "and that section is merely interesting historically. It does not greatly advance our investigations."

He took up Rube Carter's letter and read a part that he had marked.

"Well, Sis, here I am, quite alone, except for the dog and a pack of wolves that are howling like mad outside in the snow. The captain went off a week ago on the war trail after Eye-of-the-Moon, taking all the remaining boys along with him, including that skunk of a fellow Lewell, who is only to be trusted because he is interested in the common cause, and I only hope they'll corral the blooming Redskins, as they certainly will do if the boss once gets on a trail that isn't covered by the snow. It's snowing now like old boots ; but even the snow hasn't kept the wolves from their ghoulish work. They've finished the Indians we killed, and it's odds on their having done the same by some of our own party. With his wife and child killed by Redskins, you may bet your eyelashes the captain isn't as sweet as sugar. My stars, how he fought ! His grim stand against the Pathans that time when he saved my life and won his V.C. was nothing to it. For then, out in India, he was only fighting for a red-headed sinner, that wasn't worth saving ; but the other night it was for his wife and child and home that he fired each killing shot, and he never touched the trigger but a bullet went slap bang into a Redskin. And the yells the brutes made are ringing still in my brain. For a race that have the reputation of being silent, Indians are capable of making an extraordinary amount of noise."

Harold Fritton put out his hand.

"Wait, Severn," he said; "just read that bit over again, will you, about Uncle Reginald's grim stand."

Mr. Severn obeyed, and then continued:

"I think I wrote to you about the captain's wife—Mrs. Fritton—in a former letter. But I am sure I did not describe her. Never, even in England, have I seen a woman so beautiful. Most Indian girls are frankly ugly, whatever their braves may think of them; but Pine Leaf was tall and majestic, and every movement she made was as graceful as the flight of a swallow. Do you remember the picture of the 'Madonna and Child' that used to hang in father's study at Eton? That is what she was like, and I was thinking of that picture when I was looking at her that evening last week, just before the Indians broke in upon us. She was kneeling in the firelight, playing with little Harry, and dangling the captain's Victoria Cross in front of the little chap. Harry wanted to have it, but Pine Leaf said, in her mellow voice, 'No, no, little Cayuse, it is papa's. You must be a brave man yourself, like papa, when you grow up, and then you will have a V.C. of your own, and mother will be, oh, so proud of you.' But the little one wanted it without such an inconvenient delay, and began to cry for it. Pine Leaf relented then, and fixed the medal to the governor's watch chain and a chain of beads, and put it round Harry's neck, and looked at him admiringly; and it was just then that the boss strode in, giving the alarm."

Mr. Severn paused to knock the ash off his cigar.

"That about the medal explains how the V.C. came into the hands of Eye-of-the-Moon," interposed Geoff, who had not previously heard this letter.

"I wish to goodness you had brought the medal home with you, instead of letting that desperado chap carry it off," added Fritton. "Surely he would have sold it to you."

"Yes, he'd have taken a couple of dollars for it, I dare say," returned Geoff, "and I'd have bought it, only he sneaked away without giving me a chance."

Mr. Severn went on reading:

"I only saw her alive again once after that," Rube Carter

had continued, " and that was when the Indians had made a breach in the palisade, and she stood face to face with Eye-of-the-Moon, with her gun at her shoulder, fighting like any man of us. I have told you before, sis, how this same Indian chief, Eye-of-the-Moon, was Captain Fritton's unsuccessful rival in the courting of Pine Leaf, and the boss knew well enough why he had come to the ranch. ' If I get plugged, boys,' he said, in the heat of the fight, ' don't let my wife fall into the hands of the Redskins.' Soon after that he was badly wounded, and couldn't use but his left hand, and there was Pine Leaf standing at his side like the gallant lady she was, firing shot after shot, and picking off an Indian every time. How it happened I don't know. I saw her picce flash as I rushed in front of her, saw Eye-of-the-Moon's empty hand go up to his face, where her bullet had struck him. ' Back ! Back for your life, ma'am ! ' I cried, and, when I fired my last shot, I turned to make sure she was safe, and saw her lying there dead in the snow, with a shot wound in her temple, and her husband standing over her like a tiger at bay.

" Just at that moment there was a wild inrush of savages. One struck me on the head with the butt of his gun, and I saw nothing more of the fight, and knew nothing, until Captain Fritton gave me a drink of water, and told me it was all over ; that relief had come, and that hardly a dozen of the savages had got away alive at the heels of their wounded chief. ' Look after the motherless child, Rube,' he said, ' till I come back.' And then they rode off in pursuit, not knowing that there was no child to come back to. And so I'm here alone in a desolate ranch, waiting and waiting, and listening to the wolves howling outside in the snow."

Mr. Severn dropped the letter on the table at his side, and leaned back in his chair. His cigar had gone out. For a long time there was silence in the room. Harold Fritton sat with his legs outstretched, his hands deep in his pockets, and his eyes fixed upon the toes of his patent leather pumps. At last he breathed a deep sigh, and looked up.

" Do you suppose, Mr. Severn," he asked, " that it was Uncle Reginald himself who—who saved his wife from being captured ? "

"According to western ideas, such an act would be justifiable," returned the lawyer, "and there can be very little doubt that it was he who took your aunt's life rather than see her carried off into captivity."

"My aunt? I never thought of her as that," smiled Fritton. "But I'm proud of her, just as I am proud of Uncle Reginald."

"There's a lot in that letter that we didn't know before," mused Geoff Severn. "We didn't know that the warrior Rube Carter had referred to in his statement as wanting to make Pine Leaf his squaw was Eye-of-the-Moon—the very same chap who paid me a visit that night at Birkenshaw's."

"I'm awfully sorry little Harry was killed," added Harold. "He would have been the next heir."

"The thing to be considered," said Mr. Severn, "is what is to be done. What does your lordship suggest?"

Harold Fritton looked at the lawyer rebukingly.

"I suggest that you should cease to address me as if I were Lord St. Olave," he said. "I am not Lord St. Olave, and do not intend to be, unless it should be discovered that Uncle Reginald is no longer alive."

"We can, at least, get the Court of Chancery to 'presume' his death," resumed Mr. Severn.

"You will do nothing of the kind with any consent of mine," declared Fritton. "I believe my uncle is still living. And, to prove it, I intend to go out to the Rocky Mountains myself, and search them from end to end, until I find him. Geoff shall go with me. Will you, Geoff?"

"Rather!" exclaimed that adventure-loving person. "And we'll get Buckskin Jack, the desperado, to be our guide."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PICTURES ON THE BONE

IN spite of his belief that he "thought slowly," Kiddie was decidedly an impulsive young man when it came to action. He was accustomed to doing things instinctively and without apparent consideration. Nevertheless, his impulsive instincts were generally right, and he was by no means reckless. When he declared to Gideon Birkenshaw that he was going off to the Black Hills in search of Buckskin Jack, he knew that in doing so he would not be neglecting any duty either on the ranch or in connection with the Pony Express. He had, indeed, been promising himself that on the following day he would go on the trail of a bear and her cub, whose tracks he had discovered that afternoon on the farther bank of the river when he had landed from his canoe. But there would be bears in plenty for him to hunt later on, when winter brought them south; whereas Buckskin Jack was in immediate peril, even if he had not already been killed and scalped, and, if he was to be found, either alive or dead, the search for him must not be delayed.

Old Man Gideon objected most strenuously to Kiddie's going on such a hopeless, indefinite, and dangerous journey.

"Why should you?" he wanted to know. "Buckskin Jack ain't got no claim on you, and, if he was all-fired lunatic enough to go scoutin' among the Black Hills alone at a time like this, when the Injuns are on the war-path, then I guess you'd be a double-barrelled one if you was to go in search of what's left of him."

But Kiddie shook his head.

"He saved my life in One Tree Gulch," he answered resolutely. "I guess I owe it to him to help him if I can, and I'm goin' to try."

"Nice thing if you get lost, and die of hunger in them mountain wilds," growled Gideon. "Why, a whole regiment of soldiers might scout for you for a month, and never find a trace of you! And, by the same argument, clever though you are at trackin', I don't just see how you calculate on findin' the remains of your man when you haven't a notion where to look for them. Searchin' for a needle in a haystack is child's play beside the job you're contem- platin'."

"I've more of a notion than you think," returned Kiddie with conviction. "I know what he went for, and which way he's likely to have gone."

Still, the boss tried to persuade him against going. But all the time while he was objecting he knew very well that his protests would have no effect—that Kiddie, having once made up his mind, could not be diverted from his purpose; and in the end he turned to give help and advice.

Kiddie chose from the corral an Indian pony that had not been shod, and he carefully examined its hoofs and their impressions on many kinds of ground, noting their peculiarities, so that, if need be, he should know them again, and distinguish them from the hoof marks of other horses. Clothing himself warmly in flannels, buckskin jacket and leggings, and beaver cap, he provided himself with enough food to last three days, and with a good supply of ammunition for his Winchester and revolvers. His whole kit was packed in the smallest possible compass, and he took nothing with him that was superfluous. Yet, at the same time, nothing that he might require in emergency was omitted, even to a flask of whisky, a couple of tallow candles, and a roll of antiseptic sticking-plaster.

It was a dark, moonless night when he set out, and a cold wind was blowing from the north-east. During the day previous he had noticed a bank of heavy white clouds in the north, and, when the clouds parted for a little while, he saw that the higher mountains were newly capped with snow, giving warning that winter was close at hand.

He rode westward along the beaten trail for some miles, and then branched off northward among the rugged foot-hills,

guided by landmarks dimly seen in the darkness. Half through the night he rode at an easy pace, pausing to rest his pony occasionally after a difficult climb. When deepest darkness made further progress dangerous, he halted in the shelter of a forest of giant pine trees, tethered his pony and loosened its girth, and wrapped himself in his blanket to sleep until dawn.

The howling of a coyote and the monotonous hooting of the owls disturbed him for a time, while the cold further kept him wakeful; but at length he fell into a deep sleep, from which he only awoke when daylight had already made everything distinct.

His breakfast was a dry biscuit and a drink of water from a forest stream, and before sunrise he was riding across the eastern entrance of Dead Eagle Gulch. Here it was that he began to scout for signs of Buckskin Jack; for it was in this same gloomy pass that Lem Flowers had seen Buck's horse. Lem had crossed the farther end of the gulch by the old coach trail; but Kiddie had approached by a nearer way, and so saved his pony a good five miles, while avoiding the gulch altogether, as he surmised Buck had done.

It was characteristic of Kiddie that he always tried to save himself and his mount unnecessary trouble and labour, and in the present instance it was his first purpose to find the trail of the riderless horse, and by following it backward to discover as soon as possible the actual spot where the animal and its rider had parted company.

Concerning Lem Flowers' report of this horse, Kiddie had already drawn his own inferences. Lem had said that the pony was not only riderless and spattered with blood, but also that it had been stripped of its saddle; and it was just from these facts that Kiddie made his most hopeful conclusions as to Buckskin Jack being still alive. If he had himself seen the horse, instead of only hearing of its condition at second-hand, he would have been able to tell what had happened with greater certainty. In the circumstances, however, he could merely conjecture, and his conjecture was that the blood was not the blood of Buckskin Jack, but of an Indian who had been riding the pony bare-backed, as

any Indian would prefer to do, and as Buck was not at all likely to do.

Buck might, indeed, have removed the saddle when resting his tired steed, but it was wildly improbable that he would ride away without it. What Kiddie believed was that either Buck had transferred his saddle to another mount, or else that his own pony had been captured by some Redskin, who had preferred to abandon the saddle, and been shot at by Buck while making his escape.

Crossing the mouth of the gulch from side to side, and searching the ground, that was white with hoar-frost, Kiddie was not long in finding the marks of horseshoes. They showed that the pony had wandered at a walking pace through the narrow valley. The impression of the offside hind foot was blurred and infirm, and behind every fifth impression of that same foot there was a brown drop of blood faintly discernible under the hoar-frost. From this Kiddie argued that the animal had been not very badly wounded at the back of the corresponding leg, and that its rider had, therefore, been assailed from the rear.

As he traced the hoof marks backward, the spots of blood became more frequent. He followed the trail for a couple of miles up the rough, steeply rising ground of a mountain-side. They led him always in the direction from which he had expected the wounded pony to have come. Once, for an hour or more, he lost the trail in a stream. He crossed and recrossed in his search, and at length, finding no trace, he pursued his way on the farther bank towards a stretch of bare, sandy ground. Here, again, he struck the trail; but, to his surprise, there were no longer any blood spots, and the marks of the pony's feet led in the opposite direction from those that he had been following, and he quickly realised that he was now on Buckskin Jack's outward trail.

Not only this, but he perceived that the trail had already been followed by a Redskin. For the impressions of the horseshoes were in many places covered by the prints of moccasined feet.

Here Kiddie permitted himself to criticise the scoutcraft of Buckskin Jack. Had Buck ridden a pony with bare hoofs,

instead of one that was well shod, even an Indian might have regarded his trail without suspicion ; but here was proof that he had been tracked, although how long after he had gone by it was impossible to judge with accuracy.

Kiddie now followed the double trail of Buck and the Indian, losing it often where the grass was short and dry, or the ground hard or stony ; but finding it again by following the direction which his reason told him that Buck had pursued.

He felt almost certain now of Buck's intended destination. Buck had gone out on a scout to discover, if possible, the strength and position of the hostile Indians, and he had divined, as Kiddie had divined, the probable neighbourhood of their great encampment among the Black Hills. On one occasion, when he was searching for the track that he had temporarily lost, Kiddie espied something white among the sage grass a little distance away from him. He rode up to it, and saw that it was the bleached shoulder-blade of a buffalo, placed in a conspicuous, upright position, with a wisp of grass tied round it. He dismounted and examined it, knowing that it was an Indian sign, and wondering if Buckskin Jack had also seen it.

On the face of the bone were painted in red and black several picture messages, which Kiddie had no great difficulty in interpreting. The broad end of the blade was marked with many triangles, and above these there were the figures of three loping wolves. In the midst of the triangles there was a circle with an eye in the centre of it, and a design meant to represent a racoon's tail, with many dots on it. The narrow end of the bone was marked out like a fort, with little black spots signifying the tracks of soldiers, towards which an arrow was pointed. Near the fort was a rising sun, representing the east.

What Kiddie read in this medley of rude drawings would have been of considerable value had he been here as an appointed scout. The triangles represented wigwams or a great village ; the racoon's tail gave the name of the great chief, Spotted Tail, as the circle gave the name of Eye-of-the-Moon. The three wolves might have perplexed him had

he not remembered that one of the highest of the Black Hills was known in Sioux legend as the Mountain of the Three Wolves. The arrow pointing towards the fort in the east seemed to him to bear the information that the Redskins were planning an attack in that direction, although the particular fort could not be identified.

Before he remounted, he scraped the bone clean and buried it. He now realised that he was in a dangerous neighbourhood ; for not only was he within actual sight of Three Wolf Mountain, near which, as he had just learned, the hostiles were encamped, but it was obvious that the picture message had been placed here to give information to some band of Indians who were expected to come by this particular line of approach.

Hardly a hundred yards beyond the spot where he had found the buffalo bone, he came abruptly upon a large Indian trail, scattered wide, as if a big village had recently passed. Judging the size of the trail, he thought that there could not be fewer than two hundred lodges, or between one thousand and one thousand two hundred warriors, women and children, in the band. Many of their ponies had worn shoes. This was for Kiddie an unfortunate circumstance, since he would now have increased difficulty in identifying the trail of Buckskin Jack, who had probably been on the track of this same village.

Suddenly, in the mountain silence, Kiddie became conscious of a peculiar throbbing sound. He drew rein and listened. Yes, there was no mistaking its meaning. It was the sound of many horses moving at a trot, mingled with the voices of men and dogs, and it came to him from the direction of a valley through which he had passed hardly an hour ago. Surely it was the band of Indians for whom the message on the buffalo bone had been left !

Fearing lest their scouts should find his own trail and follow him, he looked around for a means of escape. A mile or so away from him there was a cleft in the precipitous mountain-side, darkened by a thick growth of stunted trees. He rode towards it, taking advantage of every dip and hollow that might shield him. To reach his refuge he had to

cross a stream that surged wildly through a deep gorge. He sought for a possible ford, and found one where the stream widened over a shallow bed. Just as he was turning his pony to the water he checked himself at sight of the marks of a horse's shoes in the fine gravel, and his heart beat faster, for he knew that he was once more on the trail of Buckskin Jack.

Similar marks were found on the opposite side. He followed them, but had not gone far when he discovered that again they were accompanied by the impressions of a pair of moccasins. Farther on still they were crossed at right angles by a trail similar to that of the riderless pony, which he had been tracking some hours before, only that here the pony had been galloping, and there was a splotch of blood at each step of its wounded limb. Kiddie felt now that he was on a hot scent, and he followed the trail of blood. It led him in a direct line towards the cleft in the hillside; but he had not gone more than a score of yards when he pulled up abruptly at sight of a dead Indian, who lay in a heap across his path.

Kiddie dismounted and turned him over. There was a bullet wound in the middle of his back, and an ugly cut on his face that had evidently been made by a heel kick of the pony from which he had fallen. He still gripped his scalping knife in his rigid fingers, and at his side were his bow and his quiver of arrows. Kiddie noticed with a pang of trepidation that his knife was ominously stained.

Beyond him the pony's track was free from blood, by which Kiddie argued that two shots had been fired in quick succession, the first hitting the horse, and the second its rider.

It was impossible to doubt that those shots had been fired by Buckskin Jack. But where now was Buck himself? Was he still alive? Those ominous stains on the Redskin's knife were almost a proof that he had at least been wounded, and Kiddie reflected that even a man who is fatally hurt may still exert himself to use his gun in the last flickering moments of his fading strength.

CHAPTER XIX

ONE AGAINST MANY

CLEARER and now unmistakable came the sounds of the approaching Indians. Kiddie could distinguish the individual sounds—the regular tread of hoofs, the scraping of the travoiso poles along the ground, the snorting of horses, the yelps of dogs, the harsh voices of the men, and the shriller voices of their squaws and children.

It was already towards noon—for he had been travelling many hours before he came upon the body of the dead scout—and he began to dread that the Redskins might presently come to a halt, and light their fires to cook their buffalo meat. They might even approach so near that they would send for firewood to these very trees amongst which he had taken cover, and the wood gatherers, discovering his trail, or the trail of Buck's pony, would surely have the curiosity to follow it! He wondered if he had been wise in destroying the message on the buffalo bone. If he had left it for them to find, they would probably have quickened their pace, and made a forced march towards Three Wolf Mountain without halting at midday.

By the volume of the sounds that came to him, he judged that the band was a large one, and he knew that its members would be scattered wide. Fully did he recognise the peril of his present position. There could be no going back, for he would certainly be seen if he ventured beyond the sheltering trees. Behind him there was a precipitous mountain-side, which no horse could climb, and it would be more than hazardous to abandon his pony. Besides, now that he had tracked Buck so far, he wanted to assure himself of what had happened to him.

Leaving the dead scout as he had found him, he went

forward, leading his pony further in among the trees. And soon he discovered the place where Buck had rested, and probably slept. It was indicated by many signs. Here was the tree to which his pony had been tethered, with the knotted lariat which the Indian had cut. Beside the same tree were the marks of a man's boots, and the scores made by his spurs. He had been confident of his safety, for here was a little circle of tobacco ash, where he had knocked out his pipe, and a couple of spent matches, with some crumbs of biscuit. None of these traces were such as an Indian would have left.

Kiddie searched for the missing saddle, but did not find it. And yet Buck would hardly have carried it away. He had probably hidden it with the intention of returning for it when he had recovered his own, or found another pony. He had gone away very cautiously, for beyond this point Kiddie could discover no faintest trace of him. He might almost have gone through the air, for all the track he had left behind, and, as it was certainly more than six-and-thirty hours since he had fired at the escaping scout, he had probably travelled a very considerable distance. Kiddie, indeed, despaired of finding him, and turned to think of his own immediate safety, and that could only be assured by his moving away from this place.

Leading his pony to the foot of the cliff, he hobbled the animal by its front feet, and tethered it to a tree with his lariat. Then he took his saddle, and bridle, and rifle, and hid them very carefully in a clump of bushes, returning by the way he had gone, and wiping out all his tracks. Carrying nothing but his wallet and his tightly rolled blanket, he then proceeded to climb the steep mountain-side, turning every now and again to take in the aspect of the locality, so that he should know the lie of the land on his return.

Up and up he climbed, until he was far above the highest tree-tops. Once his clambering feet disturbed a stone that rolled and bounded from rock to rock with startling noise. Fearing that the sound might be heard by the Indians, he crouched down and remained motionless for many minutes, when he went on again more cautiously.

There was a high, rugged hill between him and the further valley through which he judged the Indians to be travelling, and he worked his difficult way obliquely upward, so that he might be able to see them and watch them over its eastern shoulder.

At length he reached a level plateau, along which he could move more quickly; but before starting he gathered some stones and built them into a cairn to indicate the place where his upward climb had ended. He did this because he had already observed that the clouds were lowering and taking on the peculiar dun-grey tint that foreboded snow. He was aware, too, that the north-east wind was becoming more bitingly cold, and this added to his apprehension of a snow-storm.

The plateau along which he now strode continued for a full mile to the eastward. To his left there was the rugged side of the mountain, and to his right a deep cliff. He was careful not to walk along the brink of this precipice, knowing that sharp Indian eyes would quickly detect his presence if he should so expose himself. After a while, however, on hearing the tramping of horses more distinctly, he went down on his hands and knees, and crept to the edge and looked over through the fringe of dry grass.

The valley beyond the hill was now stretched in front of him, and in its midst he saw the approaching band of Redskins, with all their equipment of a large village, straggling like a scattered army of ants over the brown, undulating plain. A party of scouts galloped in advance of the main body. He watched them, marking the direction in which they rode.

That direction was not towards the Mountain of the Three Wolves, but towards a wide embayment of the low hill in front of him, at whose base ran the same creek which he himself had lately crossed with his pony. They appeared to be making for this stream.

Presently a chief, wearing a great war-bonnet and carrying his feathered staff, rode out after the scouts. When he was level with them, he took his bow and fired an arrow. The scouts rode up to the spot where the arrow alighted, and

Kiddie, watching them, knew that on that spot the chief's lodge was to be pitched. More than ever now he regretted having destroyed the message which would have sent this band onward to join their allies under the lee of Three Wolf Peak. For their village would soon stretch its lines of lodges across his only avenue of escape, and he might even perish of hunger before they chose again to remove their encampment. Within an hour, indeed, their teepees were all erected, their ponies grazing, their squaws were busy with their cooking pots, and the whole village bore the appearance of having been established there for a month.

Clearly he was in a difficult corner. There was danger in going back to the place where he had left his pony, because of Buck's trail, which would now almost surely be discovered ; and there was no possible advantage to be gained by wandering further upon the mountains on foot while he still was ignorant of the direction which Buckskin Jack had taken. His only course seemed to be that of remaining here on the grassy plateau within possible reach of his pony, in the event of the Redskins affording him a chance of escape. He had food in his wallet, and he had his blanket and could even manage to hold out for three or four days, if necessary.

So he lay there motionless, as if he were a part of the hill, and waited, idly watching the Indians as they lighted their fires, and cooked and ate their food, and threw the scraps to their curs. He saw the medicine men holding a pow-wow, sitting in a circle, and passing the calumet pipe to each other with much ceremony, while the children played a war game, and the squaws chopped wood, and the braves trimmed their arrows and cleaned their guns. He decided that they were of the Cheyenne nation, the friends of the Sioux, whom they evidently intended to join.

Towards evening he observed a new activity among the savages. They rounded up their ponies and hobbled them between the village and the creek. They moved some of their teepees, bringing them closer together with the door flaps facing the south-west, and they tightened the anchor stakes and the pegs by which the lower edges of the hide lodge covers were secured to the ground. Finally they

fastened storm-caps on the top of the projecting teepee poles, over the smoke vents.

"Seems they calculate those lowerin' clouds mean business," said Kiddie to himself, opening his blanket, "and I guess they ain't a whole lot wrong."

He wrapped his blanket round him and ate a biscuit. By the time he had eaten the last crumb the first feathery flakes of snow were whirling past him, the wind grew momentarily colder and more fierce, and he began to wish that he could return to the comfortable shelter of the trees where he had left his pony. But the Indians were still alert; their scouts were prowling around, and the cliff by which he must descend could be seen from the village. While daylight remained it would be fatal to run the risk of exposing himself.

He moved back across the grass, and climbed the further slope for some distance, searching among the rocks for a shelter. He came to a large boulder, and was going round to its lee side when he stopped abruptly, hearing a movement behind the rock. His hand went to his revolver. Had he been tracked? He crept round the rock, half expecting to discover one of the Indian scouts, when suddenly there bounded out a big-horn antelope.

The frightened animal raced across the plateau and soon disappeared. Kiddie took its comfortable place, resolving to make it his retreat for the night; and there he curled himself up in his blanket, and was soon soundly asleep.

When he awoke his limbs were cramped with cold, and there was a thick layer of snow upon his blanket. Even in the darkness he could see that, beyond his shelter, the ground was deeply covered, and that the snow was still falling. He could not more than guess what time it might be, but the depth of the snow told him that he must have slept many hours. By the white glow of the snow he could distinguish the nearer landmarks, and he determined to make his way back to his pony. What tracks he made would soon be obliterated, as those of Buck's pony would be long ere this.

With some difficulty he discovered his cairn of stones, and began the slow and tedious descent, keeping a watchful

eye the while upon the dim camp fires of the Indian village. But when he got about half-way down these lights were hidden from him behind an intervening hillock. From this point he took a safer and more oblique course than the one he had taken in climbing upward, and he reached the level ground at last with no more harm than a bruised shin.

In the darkness and the mist of thickly falling snow he made many wrong turns; but he kept to the wall of cliff, expecting soon to hear some movement of his pony. At one point, where it was very dark, he had to feel his way along the rock and go slowly. As he was thus proceeding, his foot met something that yielded to the pressure, and he shrank back. Was it the dead Indian scout that he had come against?

He stooped and touched it with his cold hand, and knew at once that it was not the Indian. Neither was it his pony. As he felt its shape he realised that it was an antelope—a big-horn. For a moment he wondered if it could be the same one that he had disturbed on the plateau, and if in its flight it had fallen down the precipice. But the comparative smallness of this one's horns assured him that this was not so. He dared to strike a match. The light burned steadily. The air was strangely still just here, and the snow seemed suddenly to have ceased falling. The dead antelope, too, was entirely free from snow!

With the light of a second match in his hand, he looked upward and around, and discovered that he had wandered into the entrance of a large cave. Very quickly his eyes took in his weird surroundings. Before the light went out he had realised that the antelope had been shot behind the shoulder, and that it had been dragged in here by a man, who had left the imprint of his boots on the moist ground, before the tiny rivulet, which ran through the cavern, had been caught in the hardening grip of the frost.

Kiddie sat down to think, spreading his blanket over his knees. From afar there came to him the dismal howling of a wolf. He shivered.

"Guess it was Buckskin Jack that dragged this meat in here," he reflected. "It wasn't him that killed it, though.

That wound in the shoulder wasn't made by a bullet, and Buck ain't the man to fire his rifle at anything short of an Indian when he's on a scout, and don't want to be seen or heard, and isn't just starvin'. I calculate he brought it in here after his pony had gone off. Dare say he thought he'd need it."

Kiddie moved about on the floor of the cave, searching with his hands for a level place on which to make his bed. He came upon a stack of timber, caught hold of a thin branch, and presently broke a twig from it. It broke with a sharp crack.

"Buck was too wise to think of makin' a fire," he decided. "I reckon this wood was brought in here years ago. It's dry as a bone. Shouldn't wonder at some old-time trapper havin' made his home in this cave. Guess I'd best bring my pony in. There's heaps of room."

He crept out into the snowy night, and once again searched for the place where he had left his horse. He found his saddle and gun where he had hidden them; he found the dead scout; but of the pony there was no sign. Backward and forward he went, thinking he had mistaken the way; but again and again he came back regularly to the same unmistakable spot.

Here, without a doubt, was the tree to which he had securely bound his lariat, with knots most carefully tied, yet both lariat and pony were gone!

Little use was there now in searching for the track of the Indians, who had thus robbed him of his means of escape. The snow covered everything. But he judged that during his absence on the mountain some of the braves from the village had followed up the trail of Buckskin Jack as he himself had followed it, and that, finding the pony unprotected, they had taken it away with them. Most probably they had supposed it had been the property of the scout whose dead body they must also have discovered. Kiddie wondered what conclusions they had drawn from finding the moccasin trail as well as the separate trails of the two ponies, and he had a strong enough belief in Redskin sagacity to feel sure that it would not be very long before they returned.

Fully conscious of the immediate peril of his situation, he went back to the cave, carrying with him his rifle and saddle and bridle. This time he penetrated farther into the recesses of the cavern, and lay down with his saddle for a pillow, waiting anxiously for day, and trying to prevent himself from falling asleep.

Not that his couch was comfortable enough to woo him to slumber. On the contrary, it was rough and hard. He attempted to make it more level. As he was doing this he took hold of what felt like a large, hard ball. He lifted it in his two hands, but instantly dropped it, and, with a cry of horror, stepped back. It was not often that Kiddie trembled; but he trembled now, and for once in his life he was superstitiously afraid of the darkness—so much so that he took out one of his candles. As he struck a match to light it, his natural courage returned to him, but only for an instant, for, as he held the tiny flame aloft and gazed upon the ground, a gruesome, horrifying sight was revealed to him. Six or seven human skeletons lay scattered on the floor!

The light of the match died out, but he had seen enough to convince him that this mountain cavern in which he had taken shelter was a large grave into which, perhaps, some unfortunate emigrants or trappers, who had been killed by the Indians, had been thrown, or in which, perhaps, they had sought refuge from a winter storm, and slowly perished of hunger and cold.

He dropped the extinguished match and put away his candle, preferring exposure to the snow and wind outside to remaining any longer in the presence of such grim company.

Slowly he made his way back towards the open air, dragging his saddle and gun and blanket along with him. But here a new and a far more real peril awaited him. Suddenly the silence was broken by a long, wild howl that sent a thrill through him. It came from just beyond the entrance of the cave, and he knew by the "whirr-ree, whirr-ree" in it that it came from the throat of the dreaded buffalo wolf, or Kosh-e-nee, of the prairies. There was another howl from some yards beyond the first, and then another, and presently

a loud chorus from a dozen filled the night, mingled with savage snapping and snarling. A pair of glistening red eyes appeared in the opening, and Kiddie saw behind them the gaunt form of a great grey wolf outlined against the snow.

Outside the clamour of yelps and growls and angry snarls increased, and he knew what was going on over the body of the dead Indian scout. He stood perfectly still, watching the animal nearest to him. He could see the vapour of its panting breath, its long, lolling tongue and glistening fangs. He dared not shoot, knowing that the report of his gun would inevitably be heard in the Indian encampment. For himself he did not greatly fear, but, having in mind the fate of the men within the cave, and his own very scanty supply of food, he wanted to save the dead antelope from the ravenous pack. It was the big-horn that this grey brute at the entrance was after. Kiddie was now in front of the antelope, between it and the wolf, watching the glaring red eyes that were fixed steadily upon him. The wolf sat on its haunches, apparently resolved to wait. But presently several of its companions advanced, their dark, snow-powdered forms moving about silently until a full score of them were gathered in a half-circle about the entrance of the cave.

With his foot Kiddie drew towards him one of the smaller branches from the pile of dry wood near him. Very quickly and dexterously he broke off the smaller twigs. He did the same with another branch, collecting the twigs in a little stack. Even at the risk of betraying his presence to the Indians, he must light a fire. Fortunately the wind was blowing towards the south, and the smoke would not go near the village, while the intervening hill would screen the light of the flames.

He stooped and struck a match, and carefully lighted a bunch of the smaller twigs, nursing the flames until they had taken hold, when he put on more fuel.

As a gust of smoke was wafted towards them the wolves retired a few paces, and he had time to pile on more wood. The promise of warmth was comforting to him, for his feet and hands were exceedingly cold. But, placed as he was,

between the wolves on the one hand and the skeletons on the other, he was the victim of a nervous chill which no warmth could subdue, and it must be owned that his dread of the wolves was far less keen than his superstitious dread of the dead men's bones. He could face the hungry animals, and meet without actual fear the many pairs of glistening red eyes that now confronted him through the smoke ; but it would have required more courage than he possessed to look again upon those human remains that lay so grim and silent within the cave.

It was only a small fire that he had kindled, yet, powerless though it was to warm the air, it still seemed at first to have the effect of keeping the wolves at bay. But presently the brutes grew bolder, and at last one of the largest of them leapt forward, only to be met by a blow from the butt end of Kiddie's rifle, which flung him aside into the fire. There was a yelp of pain, and a smell of singed fur as the animal retreated. Kiddie rebuilt the scattered fuel, and by the light of the crackling flames he saw that the pack was far more formidable than he had estimated. At least half a hundred panting wolves were now crowded about the opening of the cave, yapping and snarling and pushing nearer and nearer. Many of them had blood about their muzzles, yet they all seemed equally hungry for the antelope meat.

Suddenly one of them bounded past him. Then another and another ran in, and leapt upon the big-horn, tearing at it ravenously. Kiddie had hardly time to step back when the whole pack rushed in, scattering the fire in all directions, yelping, howling, snarling, and fighting more viciously than ever. They crowded against him, pressing him back and back. He struck at them with his gun ; but they only snapped at him. One even leapt at him with a horrible deep growl. With his left hand he gripped it by the throat, and held it from him while he dropped his rifle and took out his knife, plunging the blade between the monster's ribs. The wolf rolled over, and instantly a crowd of its companions were upon it, tearing and crunching at it savagely.

Even while he was defending himself Kiddie remembered the danger of firing a gun ; but he could only lose his life once,

and, after all, death at the hands of the Indians could not be much worse than being torn to pieces by these ferocious animals, and he determined in the last extremity to use his pistols. So he stood with his back to the wall of rock waiting, with a revolver in each hand.

Already the wolves had left nothing of the antelope but its horns and some of the larger bones, and they had nearly demolished their companion when two or three of them transferred their attention to Kiddie. He felt them sniffing at his wounded shin and at the food in his wallet, against which he was leaning. At first he kicked at them, but this had little effect, and at last, when one sprang at him with wide-open jaws, biting at his uplifted arm, he fired. The shot was followed by a fearful yell as the brute collapsed.

The fact that he was now able to discern each separate wolf, even though his fire was extinguished, told him that dawn had come; and now, in desperation to save his food and escape outside to the open, he fired to right and left, working his way inch by inch through the snarling mass, until he had emptied both his revolvers. He had not forgotten to sling his rifle over his shoulder; but this was an awkward weapon for close quarters, and again he pressed his back to the wall, and began to reload his two pistols. While he stood still he was not molested, and the wolves turned from him to fight and scramble ferociously over their maimed brothers, whom he had shot.

For a moment the passage was clear. Watching his opportunity, Kiddie ran out of the cave. The snow was still falling in thick, heavy flakes, but darkness had given place to the grey light of early morning. He went forward quickly, fearing that at any moment the wolves might follow him and attack him before he reached a place of safety on some shelf of rock, or among the boughs of some tree. He passed the place where he had found the dead scout; but all that remained to mark the spot was a knife, a few broken arrows, and the tattered remnants of a blanket lying in confusion in the blood-stained snow. The ground all about bore the footprints of the wolves.

He hurried on towards a large cotton-wood tree that stood

conspicuous among the willows, but had not gone many yards through the deep snow when he was alarmed at sight of the newly made track of a pair of snowshoes. Were the Cheyennes searching for him?

It was not many minutes since he had fired the first of his twelve shots, and the Indians, if they had come out to track him, must surely have started from the village much earlier. Perhaps, after all, the smoke or the reflection of his fire had betrayed his presence here. However it was, Redskins were certainly hovering near. What was to be done?

A savage snarl determined him. The wolves were his immediate danger, for they were already following on his scent. If he could reach the cotton-wood tree and climb it, he might be safe, for a time, at least. He was ploughing his way towards it when, glancing aside to know the cause of a movement that had caught his eye among the willows, he was alarmed at seeing three mounted Indians. They were hardly a hundred yards away from him, and they seemed to be following the trail of the snowshoes.

Taking what cover the snow-laden bushes and rocks afforded him, he went swiftly onward. Wolves were loping around in all directions now, and he was trusting to their diverting the attention of the Indians. While he approached the tree he was resolving in his mind by which branches to climb; but, as he looked at its stout trunk from over a bank of snow, he saw something which brought him to an abrupt halt. Against the lee side of it, where there was no snow, there stood the figure of a tall man. He was helplessly bound to the tree by hide ropes tied about his legs and arms and neck, and his head was bowed over his chest as if he were either dead or unconscious. His clothing was that of a frontiersman—a beaver cap, leather jacket, and buffalo-skin chaps. Kiddie could not see his face, but he had seen enough to know that it was a white man.

Without an instant's hesitation he whipped out his knife, and, not caring now whether the Indians saw him or not, he ran up behind the tree and cut the thongs.

The man fell in a heap on the snow, but a faint moan

escaped him, and Kiddie was quickly on his knees beside him.

"All right, mate, it's a friend," he whispered, and, opening his flask of spirits, he added, "Here, drink a drop of this."

He turned the man over on his back, and put the flask to his lips. Not until this moment had he thought of who it might be that he was helping, and he started forward eagerly when he saw the face with its black beard and its blue eyes staring blankly up at him.

"Buck!" he exclaimed. "Buckskin Jack! Guess I was nearly too late. Quick! Take a drink. The Redskins are mussin' around. Where's your gun? You'll need it. Say, you're just cold as ice!"

He caught one of Buck's hands, poured some whisky on the palm and fingers, and began to rub. Then did the same by the other.

A light of recognition came into Buck's eyes.

"Why, you're Kiddie!" he murmured. "How did you get here? Was that you I heard firing a while ago?"

"Yep," Kiddie answered. "Wolves. Thar's a heap of 'em about. One's nosing up to us now. But it's the Redskins I'm afraid of. Here, take my rifle while I have a look round. It's loaded up."

He rose to his feet and disappeared behind the tree.

Buck took hold of the Winchester. It was the new one which Mr. Severn had given to Kiddie. Not for many a day had Buckskin Jack handled a weapon so beautiful. He glanced at the maker's name plate, and he drew a deep breath as his eyes fell upon the address, "Pall Mall, W." He wondered how it had come into the possession of this half-caste boy, who had now so opportunely come to him with unexpected relief.

"D'you feel anyways fit to mount a pony and ride for your life?" asked Kiddie, reappearing suddenly and speaking very quickly in an eager whisper.

"Guess I'd just like to try," said Buck. "But I ain't shapin' to escape alone and leave you here. Where d'you reckon on gettin' a pony, though? If that was yours that I found hereabouts 'fore the snow came on, 'tain't available,

and we're both of us as good as done for, unless you clear away right now and hide yourself."

"Git!" retorted Kiddie impatiently. "Just you keep an eye on me, with that gun ready, case you need to fire it."

For his own sake, and in any other circumstances, Kiddie would never have done what he did now. But another life as well as his own was at stake, and the situation was desperate. He had seen that two of the three Cheyennes had dismounted, leaving their ponies obediently standing, while they had all three gone on the trail of their scout who wore the snowshoes. The one who was riding had kept to the open, his companions on foot making a short cut among the willows. By their movements, they seemed to be searching for some sign of the tracks since covered by snow. But the trail of the wolves had diverted them, and they were now crawling cautiously in the direction of the cave.

It was their two ponies that Kiddie wanted to reach, and he went towards them, bending low, and running like a lapwing along the snowy ground. He crept behind them. They moved restlessly as he approached, but very quickly he went under the belly of the nearest, got betwixt them, and seized their two halters. In a very few moments, then, he was astride of one of them, and was leading the other back towards the place where Buckskin Jack was waiting.

He urged the mustang to a gallop, but it shied as an arrow flashed over its outstretched neck. There was a wild yell. Then Kiddie saw the mounted Indian fixing another arrow to his bowstring as he rode towards him, between him and the tree.

CHAPTER XX

QUITTS

BUCKSKIN JACK took in the desperate situation at a glance. The mounted Redskin had come between him and Kiddie with astonishing speed, and Kiddie, with two strange ponies to manage, was hopelessly cut off from escape. Not only did the Indian bar his way back to the tree, but half a dozen wolves were now hovering around him, evidently intent upon attacking the ponies, while the three Cheyennes on foot, including the one with the snowshoes, alarmed by their companion's yell, were emerging from among the willows near the cave.

Realising, as he had done all along, that liberty and life for Kiddie and himself depended solely upon those two ponies which Kiddie had so courageously captured, Buck stood watching. The excitement of the moment sent the warm blood tingling through his stalwart frame that had been cramped and frozen by a long night's torturing exposure, and he disregarded his own bodily pain and weakness in contemplating the danger of the half-bred boy, who had come so unexpectedly to his rescue.

The Indian, galloping through the snow, fired his second arrow, which just missed its mark. Then he took his tomahawk in hand, yelling menacingly, as if to frighten his intended victim.

Kiddie was directly beyond him, and Buck hesitated to fire, lest he should miss the Indian and hit either Kiddie or one of the ponies. But just as the warrior was dashing forward with uplifted weapon, Kiddie swerved round, digging his heels into his pony's flanks. Buck then raised his gun to his shoulder and fired.

For once his aim was unsteady, and the Redskin galloped on unhurt, in hot pursuit, with a couple of wolves in his wake, snapping audibly. He was gaining ground quickly, for his pony understood its rider, while the mustang upon which Kiddie was seated was difficult to manage. But again Buck fired, and this time the warrior fell forward, dropping his tomahawk to fling his arms round his pony's neck.

Thus he held on. But his blanket slipped loose from his shoulders, and his steed, treading upon a corner of it, stumbled, throwing its rider, upon whom the wolves instantly leapt, while the riderless pony turned aside to pursue its own unguided way back towards the encampment.

Kiddie's way was now clear, excepting for the three Redskins on foot, who were running out from the timber to try to intercept him, and he made straight towards Buckskin Jack. Buck limped painfully forward to meet him, with the Winchester over his arm, and a finger on the trigger.

"Quick!" cried Kiddie, drawing to a halt in front of him, and stretching forth a hand to help him to mount the spare pony.

Buck needed no urging. He gave Kiddie the rifle, and got between the two animals. But he was weak and wounded, and had not the strength to mount. Kiddie then slid to the ground and gave him a leg up.

By this time the three Indians were close upon them, and one of them began to open fire with a revolver, which seemed to be the only weapon they were provided with, apart from their knives and hatchets.

"Guess that's my gun the varmint's usin'," said Buck, seizing the halter which Kiddie had flung to him. "Lucky for us he don't just know the way to manage it. Ah, but that wasn't a bad shot! Say, are you all right?"

Kiddie was already astride, lying forward along his pony's shoulder.

"Yep," he answered lightly, gripping a revolver. "Hustle along. I'm after you."

He coolly fired a shot from under the mustang's neck at the savage with the revolver, aiming so well that his bullet actually struck the weapon from the Redskin's hand.

"Reckon that frightened him some," he said. And, indeed, the three of them were equally startled, for they stopped abruptly, evidently resolving to abandon the chase.

Buck led the way at a gallop through a break in the trees, and into a ravine that was new to his companion. In a few moments they were beyond range of the revolver, with a hill between them and the encampment. But beyond the hill they came within view of the Cheyenne lodges, and could see a score or so of the savages hurriedly mounting their ponies and starting in pursuit.

"Guess you'd best take my rifle again," suggested Kiddie, riding to Buck's side. "You're a better shot than I am, and I've got a pair of six-shooters handy if they head us off."

Buck took the gun in front of him.

"I don't notion they're goin' to head us off," he nodded.

With wild cries that were echoed repeatedly from the crags, the pursuing Indians raced across the level stretch of snow towards a bend of the creek, where they expected the two fugitives to cross. But the Cheyennes were almost strangers among these mountain fastnesses, while Buckskin Jack had hunted buffalo here, and knew the shape of every hill, the twists and turns of every valley and stream. Instead of making direct for the creek, he swept sharply round to the farther slopes of one of the lower hills.

For a while, as the two riders crossed the open, they were exposed to the rifle fire of the Redskins; but at long range the Indians are bad marksmen, and now they were only wasting their ammunition. Yet they continued the chase, following the tracks on the whitened ground when they could not see through the mist of thickly falling snow; and it was not until after half an hour's hard riding that Buckskin Jack considered it safe to draw to a halt and give the ponies a rest.

"Seems to me we've got out of one hole only to find ourselves in another," he said ruefully. "If there was such a thing as a white man's dwellin' within a day's ride of us, I calculate we might hope to pull through; but I allow I'm

just as near done up for want of refreshment as I've been for a long while back. I'm kind of doubtin' that you did me a good turn when you cut that rope. I'd 'most as soon the Injuns had done their worst."

Kiddie slung his haversack round from his back.

"Guess my flask ain't just empty," he said, "and I figure there's 'bout enough food here to keep us both alive until we can find more. Say, ain't you goin' to off-saddle?"

He himself dismounted, and, taking the rifle from Buck, waited for him to do the same. Buck shook his head.

"Reckon I'll stay where I am," he objected. "Thar's two or three of my ribs broke, and I've gotten a bad cut in my left leg that's givin' me considerable pain."

Kiddie looked up at him anxiously.

"P'raps you wouldn't mind allowin' me to have a squint at that cut," he suggested. "I ain't just a doctor, but I figure I could make it kind of comfortable, the same as Mr. Severn made the wound in my chest that time in One Tree Gulch."

After much persuasion, Buck dismounted and seated himself on a rock, sheltered from the driving snow. Kiddie handed him his flask and a biscuit. Buck would not eat unless his companion did also, and they sat eating together in silence. When they had finished their frugal meal, Buck bared his leg. Kiddie drew back at sight of the ugly wound.

"Say, you must have been asleep when you allowed that scout ter stick you thisaway," he exclaimed.

"That's so," admitted Buck. "I was sleepin' sound on a bed of skeletons, and woke when the varmint was finishin' my last scrap of food. Guess he figured it was my neck he hacked at, and he ran out slick. I couldn't lay my hand on my gun for a while. Then, when I went after him, he was astride of my pony, tryin' to hoist beside him a big-horn that he'd put an arrow into 'fore he tracked me into the cave. Guess you located him, eh?"

Kiddie nodded.

"He'd followed your trail for milcs, the same as I did," he said.

"The same as you did?" exclaimed Buck in wonderment. "Say, I'm perplexed. I've been perplexed all along—ever since I found your fool pony among the trees."

"Fool?" repeated Kiddie. "Guess he was a whole heap wiser'n your own pony that left you there all lonesome. Why d'you call him a fool?"

While he spoke he was cleaning Buck's wound with a corner of his neckerchief soaked in whisky.

"Why," explained Buck, "soon as I was astride of him the brute scented those all-fired Injuns that had just pitched their lodges where you saw them a while ago. He just made a bee-line for them, and 'fore I could stop him or dismount a band of their scouts corralled me, took my guns and ammunition and blanket, and tied me against that cotton-wood tree, leavin' me there helpless for the wolves to feed on, or else until they themselves should come back at daylight, as they did, to hale me off to their village, and finish me by slow torture. That's what they'd have done, sure, if you hadn't happened along just at the right time."

Kiddie glanced up from his work of binding the wound with strips of sticking-plaster.

"Did you hear me mussin' around, then, middle of the night?" he questioned.

"Sure," affirmed Buck, taking out his pipe. "I notioned it was a Redskin, else you may bet your ears I'd have given you a call."

"Then," said Kiddie in amazement, "all the time while I was up on the mountain, and when I was in the cave wrestling with them wolves that ate up your big-horn—all that time you were tied up against the tree, with this here wound bleedin' and your ribs broke; with the snow fallin' on you, the wolves smellin' round; and expectin', when daylight came, to be finished off by bein' scalped and roasted alive! Say, you've spent a heap worse night than I have. I just wish I'd known a bit sooner. Why are you puttin' your pipe away?"

Buck sighed.

"Ain't got a light," he answered. "The Injuns took my lucifers."

Kiddie produced a tin box of matches. "Here you are," he said.

"You 'pear to have most everything that's wanted," smiled Buck. "Guess you'll make a good scout one of these days. And so you followed on my trail, did you? Why, I'd like to know?"

Kiddie finished tying a rough bandage round the man's leg.

"I just figured you was in danger," he answered. "Lem Flowers found your pony away back in Dead Eagle Cañon, without its saddle, and with blood on it, and he reckoned you needed help, so I just came along. It wasn't anyways hard to find your track, and I guess Lem wasn't a whole heap wrong about your needin' help."

"That he wasn't," acknowledged Buck. "I'd have been dead for sure if it hadn't been for you. Guess we're quits, eh?"

"And now that you ain't dead, what d'you mean to do?" Kiddie questioned.

Buckskin Jack smoked for some moments in silence.

"What do I mean to do?" he repeated. "Wal, I just guess I've got to make tracks back to Fort Laramie, and tell the general I've made a mess of things—that I've found out next to nothing."

Kiddie stood up, and shook the snow from his blanket before spreading it over Buck's knees.

"Have you any objection to tellin' me just what you came along here to scout for?" he inquired.

"Wal," returned Buck, "I imagine you know most as well as I do what's goin' on in the reservations—sun-dances, councils of war, Indians rising everywhere, and all that. Guess there's goin' to be a fair mess up. What the general wanted me to find out was where the main body of the Redskins are located, and what their next move is likely to be, see? But I've not discovered much. I kind of surmise that the Cheyennes we saw just now encamped alongside of Bad Water Creek intend to join the Sioux; but that's about all I've figured out."

"I allow it ain't much," said Kiddie. "I guess you'd

have done a heap better if your pony'd not been shod. It was the trail of his shoes that the scout followed, the same as I did. No Redskin could have made a mistake about it bein' the track of a white man's pony. Guess you've got to be real cute to deceive a Redskin. Even a crumb of biscuit, or a ring of tobacco ash, a dead match, or the scratch of a spur on the ground is enough to betray you to him, ain't it, Buck ? It was signs of that sort that told me I was on a true trail."

He paused, reddening as he realised that he had been criticising the scoutcraft of an acknowledged master of tracking. Buck observed his confusion.

"Guess I'd have done a whole lot better if I'd taken you along with me," he declared candidly. "I allow you're just about right in the matter of the shoes. I ought to have known that Indians always drop scouts in their rear when they're travellin'—to make sure they ain't bein' tracked."

"Why, certainly," nodded Kiddie. "But not often so far behind as this one was. I figure you were followin' on the big trail that went along three days ago between the Rattlesnake Range and Poison Spider Creek. You followed it as far as Buffalo Creek, and then made a slant westward for the place where you made your bivouac. The scout struck your trail just before you branched off, and stuck to it like a leech till he'd located you. I guess that scout didn't need a whole lot of teachin'. Yes, he was a considerable way behind the village he belonged to. But then, he kind of knew that there was a big band of Cheyennes comin' along soon. He meant to hang around until they overtook him, and gave him something to eat ; but, findin' your trail in the meantime, he reckoned you were dangerous, so he left a message for the Cheyennes, and just tracked after you."

Buck was staring at Kiddie curiously.

"Seems to me you know more'n you say," he conjectured.

Kiddie looked back at him.

"Well," said he, "I reckon that, between us, we know

just about enough to make your journey worth a lot to them that sent you out on this scout."

"I ain't good at conundrums, Kiddie," returned Buck impatiently. "What d'you mean, exactly?"

"Why, only this," said Kiddie, "that, puttin' what you know alongside of what I've found out by sheer accident, there ain't much more to learn. What we do know is that Sitting Bull is runnin' this war against the whites. He's the boss chief, and it's him that's gatherin' all the Redskins together, back of Three Wolf Peak—Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and all the rest. Spotted Tail and Eye-of-the-Moon have joined him, and the Man Afraid of his Horses ain't shapin' to let them have all the runnin'. These Cheyennes at Bad Water Creek would have been along with them too, only that they didn't happen on the message left for them by the scout that ate your prog. I reckon it was him that left it, because his fingers were stained with the same paint that the pictures were written with on a buffalo bone I found beside the trail. Guess you didn't see it, did you?"

Buck shook his head.

"Picture writin', was it?" he questioned. "Could you figure it out?"

"Yep," nodded Kiddie. "Guess there wasn't a lot in it that I didn't understand." And he proceeded to describe the signs pictured on the bone. "I'm some puzzled about the fort," he added; "but, as the arrow pointed due east, I notion it's Fort Phil Kearney that was meant."

Buckskin Jack moved to rise to his feet.

"There ain't half a doubt it's Fort Kearney," he decided, laying his hand on Kiddie's shoulder and limping towards his pony. "Have you a notion which is the nearest way?"

Kiddie helped him to mount, handed him the rifle and a bandolier of cartridges, and then answered:

"We can't go far wrong, so long as we keep well to the east of the Big Horn Mountains and bear due north. There's the north fork of the Powder River to cross, and a score or two of creeks. I calculate it's most a hundred miles from here. But if we can get as far as Barnum to-night, and

Hazelton to-morrow, we ought to be in Kearney in good time. And, if you don't feel just able to go beyond Barnum, then it won't be impossible for me to do the rest of the journey alone. Are you about ready to start ? "

Buck answered by riding off, and in a few moments Kiddie was after him, riding in his tracks.

CHAPTER XXI

LONG TRAIL RIDGE

BUCK had a pocket compass, but this was hardly needed, for the biting wind told them only too surely which was the north. At times it blew almost with the force of a blizzard, but it came steadily from the same quarter. Towards noon the snow abated, and Buck called a halt. They dismounted again, and now, with sure hope of reaching Barnum before dark, they finished their small supply of food. So far their greatest difficulties were in crossing the head waters of the Powder River. Many of the creeks were in flood, and it was necessary sometimes to follow them back for miles before a safe crossing could be made. Fortunately the Indian ponies on which the two riders were mounted, were accustomed to rough travel, and they seemed to be tireless. Buck's wound and his broken ribs gave him great pain, and even when occasionally the ponies came together he spoke scarcely a word to his companion during the long ride.

Kiddie's programme was kept to throughout the whole journey. On the first night they slept at Barnum, a small settlement in Johnson County, where they were hospitably received and supplied with fresh ponies. They were similarly entertained at Hazelton, and on the morning of the third day they had crossed Piney Creek, and were on the heights of Long Trail Ridge overlooking Fort Phil Kearney.

As yet there were no signs of Indians. Down in the valley a train of bull waggons, under escort, was being loaded up with timber, and a company of infantry was marching into the fort. Buck and Kiddie rode slowly down the mountain road. Buck was leading. Presently he looked round, and saw that Kiddie had stopped and dismounted to pick some-

thing up from the snow at the side of the road. Remounting, Kiddie soon came abreast of him with a feather between his teeth.

"I ain't quite so sure about there bein' no Injuns knockin' around," he said, removing the feather and examining it, even smelling it. "This here plume that I've just picked up hasn't been anyways near a bird for a long while, and yet it was lyin' on top of the snow. Guess there's some thread twisted round the quill end of it. Stinks of nasty grease, too. What d'you make of it, Buck?"

Buck took the feather and looked at it.

"I never knew such a chap for guessing as you are, Kiddie," he smiled. "You don't need to guess much about a sign like this. Of course, it's dropped from some Indian's head-dress, and where there's one Indian there's liable to be many. I suspect our warning won't be any too soon."

Within the fort he sought Colonel Carrington, the officer in command. Kiddie stood a few paces apart from them during their interview, and he occupied himself by watching some gunners cleaning a howitzer, but he could not help noticing that Colonel Carrington's attitude was one of incredulity.

"Do you suppose that we have ridden for three days across the mountains to give you a false alarm, then?" he heard Buckskin Jack say with some warmth.

"The thing's impossible," the colonel answered gruffly. "The Indians are not capable of combining in the way you suggest. And besides, by your own admission you have no proof that they are gathering in such numbers."

Buck's eyes then flashed with something like indignation at this rejection of his information.

"Have it your own way, colonel," he retorted calmly. "You are a military man, and ought to know. It is not for me to contradict you. But don't forget, sir, that you have had your warning."

Saluting the commandant, he turned away and beckoned to Kiddie to follow him. They went into the barrack-room and had breakfast.

They had hardly finished the meal when they were aware

that there was great excitement in the fort, and they soon discovered the cause.

The picket at the signal station had signalled to the fort that the wood train was attacked by Indians and corralled, and that the escort was fighting.

Kiddie ran outside. From a distance there came to him the sounds of rifle fire. On the surrounding heights he could see the movements of several distinct parties of Indians, and there was a band of about twenty riding down the mountain road towards the Big Piney Creek. Here, surely, was proof enough for Colonel Carrington that there were Redskins in the immediate neighbourhood, although it was true that there seemed to be very few of them. Kiddie wondered how many there might be beyond the heights of Long Trail Ridge. For the present, however, he was excitedly interested in what was to him the novel experience of watching a party of gunners loading and training a howitzer gun. Never before had he seen a piece of artillery fired.

He watched the whistling shells as they curved through the air and fell into the midst of the Redskins on the mountain road. But this excitement lasted only a very few minutes, for the Indians quickly scattered and took cover.

In the meantime a detail was made up of four companies of infantry and twenty-six cavalrymen. They formed in beautiful order under the watchful eye of the commandant, and the entire force was sent out under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Fetterman, with whom Buckskin Jack had been conversing some minutes earlier. Before they went out Colonel Carrington gave his instructions in a loud voice.

"Support the wood train," he ordered, "relieve it, and report to me. Do not engage or pursue the Indians at the expense of the train. Under no circumstances pursue them over Long Trail Ridge."

Kiddie stood beside Buck on the high ground in front of the fort watching the command march rapidly to the right of the wood road for the purpose, he supposed, of cutting off the retreat of the Redskins then attacking the waggons. As they advanced across Piney Creek a few Indians appeared in Fetterman's front and on his flanks, and con-

tinued flitting about him, beyond rifle range, but gradually moving upward to the ridge. To Kiddie it appeared that they were trying to allure the soldiers to the further side of the hill. Already the Redskins had retreated from the wood train, which now moved on unmolested towards the trees.

Colonel Fetterman had gone out from the fort at eleven o'clock, and within three-quarters of an hour his command had reached the crest of Long Trail Ridge, where they were deployed in skirmishing order. They had halted.

Suddenly Kiddie gripped the arm of Buckskin Jack.

"Say, he ain't obeyin' his orders," he exclaimed. "He was told not to pursue them over the ridge. He ought to turn back now, I guess. I reckon he's just about done for if he goes further. There! There! D'you see? He's going on!"

Even as Kiddie spoke the soldiers disappeared over the hill's crest. Then almost immediately there followed the rattle of rifle-firing.

Buck looked round for Colonel Carrington, who was now roused to a point of wild and almost helpless indignation.

"What can I do? What can I do?" he cried, stamping his feet as he paced to and fro.

"Guess the first thing is to send out reinforcements with your howitzers," suggested Buck, "and then see that your hospital is ready."

The firing beyond the hill was now rapid and continuous, and amid the crackle of rifles wild Indian war-whoops could be heard.

Two waggons of ammunition were quickly got out, and some seventy or eighty men hastened off with orders to join Colonel Fetterman immediately. Captain Ten Eyck, who had command of them, advanced rapidly towards the point from which the sound of firing came.

Kiddie saw at once that they were not moving by the shortest route. He also noticed that the firing was becoming intermittent, diminishing in rapidity and in the number of shots. He went boldly up to Colonel Carrington and saluted him.

"Guess you're hankerin' to know what's happened over there, sir," he faltered. "If you've got no objection to offer, I think I could get a sight of the battle before Captain Ten Eyck, and ride back and tell you how things are. I'm a Pony Express rider."

"Indeed, I shall be obliged," returned the colonel. And in a very few moments Kiddie was astride of his pony, flashing across the snow to the mountain road. He reached it in advance of Captain Ten Eyck, and, while the relief party were still but half-way up the hill, he had gained the crest, and was looking down upon the Peno Valley.

All was silent. There was not a shot to be heard, or a puff of smoke to be seen. The lower slopes of the hill were crowded with Indians. Hundreds, if not thousands, of mounted warriors and braves rode to and fro across the field of snow. But of Colonel Fetterman's command there was no sign.

What had happened?

Mounted upon the topmost ridge of the hill, Kiddie waved his rifle aloft, and shouted his loudest to the advancing troops. Again and again he shouted. And the Redskins, hearing and seeing him, no doubt imagined that a vast army of soldiers would presently appear in view. At first they mockingly beckoned to Kiddie to come down, and then they began to retreat, knowing full well that what they had just done would rouse the whole army of the United States against them.

Kiddie could tell by their hurried movements that their retreat was no subterfuge, and that he might ride down into the valley without fear of harm.

He waited until Captain Ten Eyck drew nearer.

"Afraid you're too late, sir," he called out, and, leaving the officer to determine his own action, he rode on into the valley.

The massacre of soldiers had been complete. Of the eighty-two officers and men who had gone over the ridge to meet their savage enemy not one was left alive. Advancing to the point where the Indians had been standing when he first saw them, Kiddie found the dead and naked bodies of Colonel Fetterman, Captain Brown, and sixty-five of the soldiers

of their command. At this point there were no signs of a severe struggle. All the bodies lay in a space not more than twenty yards in diameter. There were no empty cartridge shells, and there were some full cartridges. Several American horses lay dead a short distance off, all of them with their heads towards the fort. Farther on, where the road sloped down to Peno Creek, was the dead and mutilated body of a lieutenant, and beyond this the bodies of three young and five old soldiers. At this last spot there was an abundance of empty cartridges, and beside the body of one man who had used a Henry rifle he counted more than fifty. Within a few hundred yards of this position ten Indian ponies lay dead, and there were sixty-five pools of dark and clotted blood in the snow. He found no other ponies or pools of blood at any other point.

The Indians had used their favourite weapons, the bow and arrow. Only six men of the whole command had been killed by bullets, and as two of these, Colonel Fetterman and Captain Brown, had been shot in the temple, Kiddie argued that they had inflicted this death upon themselves, or upon each other.

On his way back to the fort Kiddie reviewed in his mind the probable details of the battle, and when he reported himself to Colonel Carrington he had formed a very clear story of the fight.

The Indians, he concluded, had been massed to resist Colonel Fetterman's advance along the creek. Colonel Fetterman had formed his advance lines on the summit of the hill overlooking the creek and valley, with a reserve near where the larger number of dead bodies lay. The Indians, to the number of fifteen or eighteen hundred warriors, attacked him vigorously in this position, and were successfully resisted by him for half an hour or more. Then the command, being short of ammunition, and awed by the greatly superior force of the enemy, attempted a retreat towards the fort. Only the older soldiers had stood their ground to the death.

This explanation, in the absence of the report of any eye-witness, was afterwards accepted by the military authorities.

"I must beg your pardon for having doubted you," said

Colonel Carrington to Buckskin Jack. "Guess I ought to have been better prepared for such an emergency."

Buck simply bowed.

"Tain't no fault of yours, colonel," he returned. "I guess it's just the United States Government that has been wrong all the time. When they ask the commanding officer of a district to defend a fort like this, right on the borders of a hostile country, and give him no more troops or supplies for a state of war than they'd allow him for a time of peace and quiet, then I calculate they just need to be taught a lesson."

"Buck ? "

"Well, Kiddie ? "

"Guess I've got somethin' to tell you."

"And what's that ? "

"Well," said Kiddie, "I've seen that pony of yours that you were so fond of—the white mare that you called Snowdrop. She was over the hill there, in the battle. And the chief that was astride of her—the chief that led the attack—I guess he's our old enemy, Eye-of-the-Moon."

"Gee !" exclaimed Buck. "Is that so ? "

"Yep," said Kiddie. "I knew him by his dandy head-dress."

CHAPTER XXII

SCOUT BY PROFESSION

BUCKSKIN JACK had spoken with the wisdom of long experience when he declared to Colonel Carrington that the United States Government had been wrong all the time in their dealings with the Indians.

From the first they had failed to appreciate the true strength of the savage enemy. Stories of Redskin raids on isolated ranches and prairie farms, and of attacks on travellers across the plains, were heard at Washington with sympathy ; but that a force consisting of eighty-two officers and men should be totally annihilated in the course of a short half-hour's fight was truly alarming, and the disaster did not fail to awaken the war department to a sense of grave responsibility.

Yet, even after this warning had been sounded very little was done. There were many forts on the borders of the Indian reservations which remained just as ill-prepared to resist their hostile neighbours as Fort Phil Kearney had been, and it was many months before the military authorities were brought to realise the full meaning and extent of the rising among the Red Men.

It was calmly supposed that the Indian tribes were incapable of combining together in a common cause against the whites, and that the discontent was confined to a few small bands of undisciplined braves, who could easily be subdued by the frontiersmen whom they menaced, without the intervention of military force.

No credit was given to the Redskins even for a reasonable amount of intelligence and sagacity ; and that they should have a leader with the military genius of Sitting Bull was beyond imagination. But the Indians, trained by generations

of warfare, were cunning enough to screen their movements and wholly to deceive their white enemies as to their numbers and their intentions ; whilst, by means of magnificent scouting, they kept themselves thoroughly informed of every movement of their opponents.

On the other hand, the Americans too often neglected to avail themselves of the assistance of capable and trustworthy scouts, and even received the information volunteered by the frontiersmen with incredulity or indifference. As a consequence, when the time came for resolute action, small companies of ill-equipped troops were sent out with orders to subdue a handful of savages, when a brigade should have been despatched to do battle against an army of thousands of well-trained warriors, who were artists in strategic cunning, and who were furnished with the material for carrying on a long and terrible war.

One serious trouble arose out of a statement made by General Crook after a fight on Powder River, in which he repulsed Crazy Horse's village of one hundred and five lodges.

General Crook asserted that his expedition had proved that the reports of the strength of Sitting Bull's army had been exaggerations ; that, instead of there being fifteen or twenty thousand hostile Indians in the Black Hills and Big Horn country, the total number could not, in reality, exceed two thousand.

This estimate was wrong, but it was accepted as correct, and upon the basis of it an expedition was organised, with the purpose of finally quelling the Indians. It was sent out in three separate divisions under Generals Terry, Gibbon, and Crook. They were to move simultaneously from north, east, and south, and it was expected that they would form a junction near the head waters of the Yellowstone River, in North-west Wyoming.

No further proof is needed to show how little prepared the Americans were for the task they had undertaken than the statement that the combined forces of these three generals did not exceed two thousand seven hundred men, while opposed to them were fully seventeen thousand Indians, all of

whom were provided with the latest and most improved patterns of repeating rifles.

It was on an afternoon in early summer that Kiddie of Birkenshaw's received official orders to report himself to General Crook at Fort Reno.

During the winter and spring he had been occupied intermittently as a Pony Express rider and carrier of the Government despatches, and in the intervals there was hunting of big game in the neighbouring forests, as well as plenty of work to be done on Gideon Birkenshaw's cattle ranch and arable lands. The life was a healthy one, and, with abundance of wholesome food, ample sleep, cleanliness, and sobriety, he had got himself into superlative bodily condition. His muscles were hard as steel, and his every faculty was in faultless working order. Naturally fond of horses, he had become one of the most daring riders on the Salt Lake Trail. No prairie pony was too wild for him to tame, no journey too dangerous for him to undertake; and, if he met with no mishaps or perilous adventures, it was because he had learned how to husband his own and his horse's strength, and was prepared to meet all dangers.

"What Kiddie don't know about prairie ponies ain't worth knowin'," was Gideon's oft-repeated verdict concerning him. Gideon "thought heaps" of Kiddie. He believed him to be capable of anything that was brave, manly, and honourable, and, when he heard of the summons to Fort Reno, he was not at all surprised. He would hardly have been surprised had Kiddie received the President's commission as an officer without the preliminary of a military training.

Kiddie had been out hunting on the Rattlesnake mountains that day, and had just returned, leading his pony, with a fine young black-tailed deer across its saddle, and his hound panting wearily at his heels.

"Guess this letter's intended for you, Kiddie," said Gideon, handing it to him as he drew to a halt at the verandah steps. He watched Kiddie opening and reading the document; but the boy's face was inscrutable.

"How long has it been waitin', Gid?"

Gideon consulted his watch. He always liked to be accurate where Kiddie was concerned.

"Just on four hours and twenty minutes," he answered. "Lem Flowers handed it to Mee-Mee, down on the trail, as he drove west with the mails this forenoon. Guess Lem brought it from back Laramie way. He figured it was important, seein' it's on Government service. You don't appear to be a whole lot disturbed by it."

Kiddie shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess you're kind of fidgeting to know what it is?" he said. "'Tain't anything great. I've to go and see General Crook. Maybe he's shapin' to give me a spell of scoutin', though he don't just say so."

"Ah!" nodded Gideon. "Discovered you at last, has he? Shall you go?"

"Why, certainly," Kiddie decided. "I reckon I ought to have started just four hours and twenty minutes ago."

"Looks kind of over-eager, rushin' off in such an all-fired hurry," commented Gideon. "If I was you I'd let that general wait awhile, and make him understand that you ain't just at his disposal whenever he likes. To-morrow mornin's quite soon enough to start."

Kiddie shook his head.

"I shall start right now," he said resolutely. And in less than an hour's time he was off, as fresh as if he had just risen after a good sleep, instead of having spent the whole day in stalking deer on the mountains.

He rode all through the night, and before the next noon he was at Fort Reno. General Crook, who saw him for a few moments, objected to him on account of his youth. He wanted men, not boys, he said. But, nevertheless, he found a use for Kiddie by commissioning him to carry a despatch to General Terry at Fort Abraham Lincoln, in Dakota.

Kiddie started at once on an uncommonly good pony, and he accomplished the hundred-mile journey without adventure.

At Fort Lincoln he was instructed to place himself under the orders of General George Custer, who was second in command of the Terry column. Kiddie was not enlisted as a

soldier, and he retained his own outfit instead of donning the uniform ; but he was allowed his choice of a mount, was provided with a service rifle and revolvers, and enjoyed many privileges without the necessity of engaging in the military routine.

The column consisted of twelve companies of the 7th Cavalry, and three companies of the 6th and 17th Infantry, with four Gatling guns, and there was a detachment of both Indian and white scouts. The whole force comprised thirty-eight officers and nine hundred and sixty men.

For some unrecorded cause the commands, which ought to have acted in concert, did not start at the same time. Their means of intercommunication were defective, their relative positions during the advance were not known to each other, and the intended junction of the forces on the Yellowstone never took place.

From each one of the divisions the enemy concealed himself most successfully, moving with baffling speed and secrecy. General Terry's column, advancing from Fort Lincoln, crossed the little Missouri, the Powder, and the Tongue rivers in succession, scouting the country to the south and west, feeling for the enemy everywhere, without finding a trace of him.

In these scouting operations Kiddie took an active part, obeying orders implicitly, giving his reports precisely and promptly, without expressing any opinion ; and he was not any the less vigilant because he privately believed that scouting was useless in a part of the country which the Indians would not naturally choose as a battle ground. He simply performed his duty without question. But when the command had crossed the Tongue River, and had come into the wilds of the Big Horn mountains, where every valley bore traces of deserted camps and old-time hunting grounds, then to his sense of duty was added his hope of success, and, like the hound that has caught the true scent of his quarry, he acquired a new excitement that revealed itself at every turn.

Perhaps a large reason for his confidence lay in the fact that he had discovered that Buckskin Jack had newly become

one of his fellow-scouts. Kiddie and Buck had not met since the day of the disaster at Fort Kearney, when they had separated, the one to remain in the fort hospital, and the other to carry news of the massacre to Laramie. But during the march between the Tongue River and the Rosebud Kiddie rode into camp one night, after an unsuccessful scout, and discovered Buckskin Jack in earnest conversation with Terry and Custer. Buck had just come in to report that he had found the main trail of the Indians.

Kiddie did not see him again that night, but on the following morning they came together as they were saddling their horses.

" You here ? " said Buck in surprise. " You seem always to turn up somehow when there's anything happenin'. Well, and what d'you think of the new move ? "

" I'll tell you when I know what it is, " returned Kiddie. " I hear you've struck the trail of the enemy, and I notion something'll be done now ; but what it's going to be hasn't yet come my way."

Buck drew him aside.

" You ain't just a fool, Kiddie, " he said, " and I believe you know a thing or two about Injuns and their ways. What's your opinion ? General Terry's about to divide his forces—goin' to send General Custer, with the 7th, up the Rosebud, while he himself takes the remainder up the Yellowstone and Big Horn."

Kiddie raised his eyebrows in genuine astonishment.

" Guess he might as well turn right back and abandon the campaign, " he said, with quick decision. " Why, he's not strong enough as it is ! And yet he's going to weaken himself by dividing his command ? Heugh ! He ain't short of confidence in himself ! "

" That's his great fault, " nodded Buck. " He's made up his mind that Sitting Bull can be crushed the same as some pesky mosquito, and no argument will persuade him that the enemy are more than his equal in number. I ain't clapped eyes on Redskins for weeks past, barring the few that are scoutin' with us ; but, if the trail I located a few hours back wasn't made by Indians with four feet instead of the usual

two, I guess he's going to have practical enlightenment that will astonish him."

"Was it a real big trail, then?" Kiddie inquired.

"A whole lot bigger'n I should like to see if I'd command of a force double the strength of General Terry's," returned Buck, "and yet, as I tell you, he's on the point of cutting his column in halves."

Kiddie was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"If he's got the idea of nippin' the Redskins in between him and General Custer, that ain't altogether a bad plan, come to think of it."

"No," agreed Buck, "it wouldn't be bad strategy if Sitting Bull were the kind of leader to allow his warriors to be corralled like a herd of stupid buffaloes. But there's a heap of difference between a buffalo and a fox."

Kiddie signed with his eyes to Buck to be silent. The two generals were approaching them. They were talking earnestly. Kiddie's sharp ears caught their words.

"Custer, I do not know what to say for the last," said General Terry.

"Say what you want to say," urged General Custer.

"Well," returned Terry. "Use your own judgment, and do what you think best if you strike the trail; and, whatever you do, Custer, hold on to your wounded."

By chance rather than by any contrivance on their parts, both Buck and Kiddie were attached to General Custer's division with the 7th Cavalry. The command moved out at once, upwards of six hundred strong, and their leader was fully confident that he was able to cope with any body of Indians that they were likely to encounter.

The troops were in the best of spirits at the prospect of a vigorous and, what they believed would be, a successful campaign. Custer's only fear was that the Redskins might make their escape without his being able to bring them to an engagement. He advanced with so much caution that the march of one hundred and eight miles occupied four days.

During those four days the scouts were busy. There were Indian signs about, but as yet the Indians themselves had not been seen. On the early morning of the fifth day, however,

Kiddie and one of the Pawnee scouts were out together on the divide between the valley of the Rosebud and the valley of the Little Big Horn when they detected the smell of burning wood in the air. They ventured further, crawling like snakes through the grass, and at length, coming to the brink of a cliff, Kiddie looked over, and perceived the smoke of many camp fires.

This was enough. He had found the enemy. By going still further, he might have been enabled to estimate the size of the village ; but he knew the danger of himself being seen by Sitting Bull's scouts, and he withdrew as warily as he had advanced, and carried his news to General Custer. An hour later Buckskin Jack rode in to confirm the information, and Custer decided to make the attack.

CHAPTER XXIII

CUSTER'S LAST STAND

HE divided his command into three battalions, one of which he placed under Major Reno, another under Major Benteen, leading the third himself. Reno was directed to follow the trail which Buck had found, and, with his three troops, attack the village. Benteen, with three troops also, was to support him on the extreme left, while Custer held the right wing.

As these battalions were moving forward into action, Custer rode well in advance with the scouts, and ascended the bluff from which Kiddie had discovered the village. Kiddie was sent on. He crept to the place where he had been a few hours earlier. The Indians were no longer there.

Searching the valley, however, he quickly discovered that they had but moved their encampment some two miles away down the left bank of the Little Big Horn River, and he hastened back to the general with the important intelligence, knowing that the enemy's change of position would necessitate a change in the order of attack.

General Custer hurriedly wrote on a page of his notebook the words, "Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs." Tearing out the page, he handed it to Kiddie.

"Take this," he said. "Ride as quick as your horse will take you to Major Benteen, and come back to me to tell me he has received it."

This order to Benteen was too plain to be mistaken. It clearly meant that Custer had discovered the village, which he intended attacking at once, and that Benteen was to hurry forward to his support, bringing up the pack train with the ammunition and ambulances. Reno required no

such orders, since he had already been instructed to follow the trail. But instead of obeying orders, both Reno and Benteen stood aloof, fearful lest they should endanger their position, while the brave Custer, with his squad, rushed down like a terrible avalanche upon the Indian village.

Buckskin Jack rode near him, marvelling at his reckless courage.

"Sir! Sir!" he cried. "It's impossible! You can't do it. There's thousands of them—thousands!"

Kiddie, returning after having handed the despatch to Major Benteen, and hastening to assure General Custer that it had been delivered, saw even more than Buck had seen. The firing had begun. Custer had halted, and his brave followers had formed a hollow square about him to meet the rush and roar and fury of the yelling savages. Five thousand Indians had swarmed out from their ambush on every side like a riot of fiends.

Down from the hill-side, up through the valleys, from every chasm and ravine, the dreadful torrent of Indian cruelty and merciless massacre had poured in a resistless flood, to swallow up the gallant little band in one grand fury of fire.

From the first Kiddie saw that, even though Reno and Benteen should fly instantly to the relief, Custer was powerless to stem the awful tide. He glanced backward, waiting to see if Benteen were coming, so that he might lead the way to Custer's position, if any guidance should be needed. But the rattle of the rifle-shots and the volleys down the river indicated exactly where the troops and the ammunition were required, and his own instructions were to hasten back to the general, and tell him that the despatch had been delivered.

Down in the nearer valley, where he had first discovered the Indians, he now saw that Reno's battalion had begun skirmishing with a separate band of the Redskins. Reno, so far, was following his orders, and, if he could get rid of the few savages who were barring his way, he ought soon to be in the midst of the main battle. Kiddie trusted that this would be so. But had he waited a little longer he would

have seen those same troops leaving their position and galloping off in wild retreat.

From the heights Kiddie tried to discover a way by which he might reach the fighting line in safety. He reflected with satisfaction that he was not in uniform ; but his gun and his saddle and his frontier clothing would still betray him. He must hide them and, covering himself with his blanket, make himself look like an Indian.

He determined to ride as far as he safely could, and then dismount, taking what cover he might, while he crawled to General Custer's side and gave him the wanted word of hope

In the meantime the fight continued, and already there were many gaps in the square, where the white men stood breasting the battle shock, bravely facing the blazing muzzles of five thousand deadly rifles. They could see nothing through the smoke but the splitting streaks of fire, and now and again the dark forms of some of the more recklessly daring savages, who advanced with knife and hatchet. And in every momentary lull of the firing there sounded the fiendish war cry of the Sioux.

Still thinking of the aid which soon must come, Custer stood in the midst of his men, cheering them with heartening words, while he peered through the misty clouds for some signs of Reno and Benteen. At his side stood Buckskin Jack, very calm and grimly silent, loading and emptying and reloading his heated gun with clockwork regularity.

“That boy has failed,” muttered Custer. “He cannot have given the message !”

“Patience, sir, patience,” returned Buck. “Kiddie has never failed.”

He thrust out his arm to arrest the fall of a man in front of him. Dropping his gun, he carried the man away to the middle of the square, where the scouts were helping the wounded. As he was returning to his post, someone swept quickly past him and went up to the general, pausing in front of him and saluting. Buck thought at first that it was one of the Pawnee scouts, but beneath the very thin disguise he recognised Kiddie.

“Delivered your message, sir,” Kiddie reported.

“Ah, thank you ; thank you !” said the general, brushing

away the powder grime that had settled on his face. And, turning to his men, he cried, "They're coming, boys."

The fight was continued with a new vigour now, although the outer line of the square was gone, and the heap of wounded and dying grew greater and greater in the centre. One after another the men sank down beside their gallant leader, until there was but a handful left, bleeding from many wounds, with the hot carbines in their stiffened hands. The ammunition was becoming scarce. Kiddie went round among the dead, collecting cartridges from their bandoliers, and serving them out. He could do little for the wounded, but he did what was possible.

Hour after hour went by, and still the expected relief did not come. At length Custer stood with less than a dozen despondent men about him, and these were being quickly reduced. The Indians came nearer, and carbines were now abandoned for revolvers and side arms. Through the lessening smoke Kiddie caught sight of a chief riding a white horse.

It was Eye-of-the-Moon on Buckskin Jack's Snowdrop, leading a party of his Sioux.

The chief rode round and round the remnants of the square, seeming to take a fiendish joy in prolonging the torture of his victims, and in reserving them for himself. More than once he checked his warriors as they took aim. Watching him, Kiddie saw him raise his gun and level it at the tall figure of General Custer, and then shift his aim to someone else. Custer and Buckskin Jack appeared as yet to have escaped all hurt. Presently they stood alone, back to back, with only a poor half-dozen wounded supporters, who fired with listless aim.

Kiddie still moved about among the injured, searching again and again for a water bottle that had not already been drained of its last precious drop. He had given up his revolvers and ammunition to the general and Buck; but there were swords lying about and carbines that could be used as clubs. In the leaden hail that pelted around him he wondered that he had not been struck. There was a dull pain at the back of his shoulder, and he felt a trickle of moisture down his spine, but that was all.

For a moment he knelt over a dying soldier who was calling piteously for water. When again he looked up, it was to see Buckskin Jack stagger and fall, and General Custer firing his last remaining shot at Eye-of-the-Moon.

Swaying in his saddle, and with a dark blotch showing suddenly on his face, Eye-of-the-Moon yet had strength to lift his gun and fire. Custer fell, but rose again to his knees, striking out with his sword. His mighty blows felled three warriors, and his blade broke on the musket of the fourth. Then, with useless sword and empty pistol, he dropped back, the victim of a dozen wounds.

Eye-of-the-Moon had slipped from his pony, whipping out his scalping knife as he staggered forward. Relieved of her rider, Snowdrop plunged among the dead and dying. Kiddie seized her loose halter, and looked around. The Indians, seeing that all was ended, were retiring to take breath before continuing with their ghastly work of looting and mutilation.

It was the act of a few moments, but Kiddie had seen his chance, and he took it without hesitation. Buck had raised himself on his elbows at sight of the white pony that he had lost. Kiddie strode up to him, leading Snowdrop.

"Quick, Buck ; quick !" he cried, and, exerting all his strength and practised ingenuity, he half lifted, half pushed his friend across the pony's back, himself climbing up behind. At a word Snowdrop galloped off.

Kiddie bent over her, urging her on with coaxing words and caresses. A bullet grazed his knee, an arrow pinned Buck's left hand to Snowdrop's side, but the faithful pony ploughed her way on out of range of shaft and shot, nor faltered until Kiddie drew rein a mile away in a sheltering cleft at the river's bank. Then he dismounted and tenderly helped Buck to the ground.

"No use, Kiddie. No use," Buck breathed, as a handful of water was held to his parched lips. "I'm done for this time, sure."

Kiddie opened the man's blood-stained shirt and disclosed the fatal wound. Buck's right hand went up to the place and took hold of something.

"You'll find some papers in my pocket," Kiddie heard him

murmur. " You'll know what to do with them. And this " —he fingered the Victoria Cross that hung by its chain from his neck—" this may be yours now. You're worthy to have it. Wear it—for my sake. You'll find my name on the back of it."

He sank back, closing his eyes.

" Your name ? " Kiddie cried agitatedly, bending over him. " Reginald Fritton ? Buck ! Buck ! Listen to me. Oh, don't die yet. Listen—quick ! I am your child—your Little Cayuse that was stolen from you. Father ! Father ! Do you hear ? "

With an effort Buck raised his head and opened his eyes, staring into Kiddie's face.

" Little Cayuse—you ? My son that was lost to me ? My little Harry ? "

He breathed deeply.

" Yes, yes ; I know," he faltered. " I understand. Your voice, and your eyes—they're like hers. That's why I've been fond of you. And I never knew, never dreamed ! Harry, I am dying. Kiss me—your father—just once, before I go ! Kiss me, good-bye."

With hot tears filling his eyes, Kiddie put his two trembling hands against Buck's cheeks, and pressed his lips upon his forehead—the first kiss that he had ever consciously given to any human being.

" A prayer, Harry—a prayer," Buck murmured.

" Our Father, which—" began Kiddie.

But already the man whom he had known as Buckskin Jack had closed his eyes for the last time.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

“AND he was my father—my father ! ” Kiddie murmured again and again, staring wonderingly at the white face that looked now so peaceful, so refined.

He started back, listening. From afar there came to him the sound of voices. The Indians were rejoicing over their grim work.

Silently he strode to the pony’s side and caught at the loose halter, leading her farther in among the trees, where he tethered her beyond possible sight of any Redskin who might pass near.

Hastening back, he went down on his knees again, unfastened the dead man’s belt and the strap of his haversack, took possession of his pocket-book, his watch, his compass, the bronze medal, his knife and pipe and empty revolvers. These he thrust into Buck’s haversack, and carried away.

With his own knife he cut a blaze on the trunk of one of the willow trees, which he had carefully chosen. Then he climbed the tree to its main fork, where he secured the haversack by its strap, well hidden by the surrounding branches.

He went back to where he had left the body. Well did he know why the Indians were lingering among the dead, and he dreaded the thought of Buck’s body falling into their hands. Yet how was it to be concealed from them ?

Even as he hesitated, he heard the tramp of horses. The Indians were coming nearer and nearer.

Kneeling down, he lifted Buck across his shoulder, grasped a leg and a wrist, and raised himself with his burden, staggering with it in among the trees. Under a shelving bank he laid it, covering it with branches torn from the bushes and willows.

Quickly, then, he ran back, and carefully turned over the blood-stained stones, removing or covering every trace and sign that might betray his presence. Very silently he worked, listening all the time to the sounds that told him that the Redskins were approaching. He knew now that many of them were coming by the same way that he himself had retreated, and that they must inevitably pass between him and the river, crossing the very stones where he had knelt at his dying father's side. On the farther bank of the river he could see a great, straggling train of Indians.

From them, with the wide river between, Kiddie had on fear. What he did fear was a similar detachment of Redskins who were slowly approaching on his own side of the stream. He drew back among the willows, and climbed the low bank beneath which he had hidden all that remained of his father. He flung himself at full length along the grassy level. Through the leafy branches that shielded him he could see the river glistening under the slanting rays of the setting sun.

He held in his breath as the first of the Indians came in sight, mounted on a fine, black mustang. It was the great chief, Sitting Bull, attended by his medicine men and chosen warriors, all of them in their full war paint. These were followed by a long procession of braves, carrying their ghastly trophies of the fight, and leading cavalry horses packed with the looted uniforms of the gallant soldiers who had supported General Custer in his last awful hour. Kiddie recognised Custer's horse among the others that followed riderless in the captured train, loaded with a bundle of cavalry swords and carbines. Many of the horses bore dead warriors roped across their backs.

As he watched the Indians passing, he lost his sense of fear. They were so much occupied in themselves, they were not likely to pay regard to any sign or sound that might lead them to the capture of a fugitive scout, and he reflected that already they must have tramped out all traces of his trail.

Company after company of them went by, hundreds and hundreds of them passed ; now in single file, now in crowded groups. But at length the baggage ponies and draught dogs, driven by squaws and children, came along. Behind these,

bringing up the rear of the army, were two chiefs with their bodyguard of braves.

The chiefs rode side by side, both of them mounted on American cavalry chargers. The nearer of them was an exceedingly handsome and dignified Indian, whose face, uncommonly light of complexion, was not disfigured by the barbaric smears of war paint. His long, iron-grey hair reached down to his saddle, entwined with the streamers of his feathered head-dress, in which a very fine racoon's tail was a conspicuous ornament. By this insignia Kiddie recognised him as the famous general, Sintagalasca, Spotted Tail. His companion was Eye-of-the-Moon.

They were in the full light of the red sunset, and Kiddie's eyes were upon them searchingly, when suddenly Eye-of-the-Moon's horse threw up its head, and gave forth a long, insistent whinny.

Instantly there was an answering whinny from Snowdrop, in among the screening trees.

Kiddie's heart gave a quick leap of fear as he saw Eye-of-the-Moon draw rein and glance round as though he had recognised a sound that was familiar to him, and then ride out from the line of march. Spotted Tail also left the trail to allow their bodyguard to pass on.

Snowdrop gave another whinny, and audibly pawed the earth.

"Hear!" exclaimed Eye-of-the-Moon. "Have I not said that she is wise? Well knows she that I am near. She is calling me as the lost buffalo calf calls its mother."

Through the trembling leaves Kiddie watched him; observing the many scalps that hung from his waist; seeing that the gaily decorated front of his leather shirt was sullied by a crimson trickle that came from a bullet wound in his cheek.

Kiddie dared not turn to watch him, and could only tell by attentive listening that Eye-of-the-Moon was making unerringly for the place where Snowdrop was concealed. He heard the chief's exclamation of surprise on finding that the pony was hobbled and tethered; heard him dismount to release the halter, and mutter to himself in irritation at his difficulty in loosening the stubborn knot.

As he listened, Kiddie was watching the movements of Sintagalasca and two warriors who had accompanied him into the glade. The chief allowed his horse to nibble at the grass. Slowly, as it ate, the animal strode nearer and nearer. It paused under the willow in whose upper branches Kiddie had hidden Buck's haversack. If Sintagalasca should raise his glance but to the level of his shoulders, he must inevitably discover the strap of the haversack encircling one of the stout boughs. By stretching forth his hand, he could grasp the haversack itself. Kiddie's pulses were beating in furious trepidation as he watched.

His apprehension concerning the precious contents of the haversack, however, was presently merged in a yet greater anxiety when one of the two warriors approached the bank upon which he was lying—the bank below which lay the dead body of Buckskin Jack, perhaps imperfectly concealed.

Kiddie had not moved; but now his hand stole slowly to his belt and gripped his knife. He was determined to defend Buck's body to the last.

But just as the prying Redskin's pony brushed against the intervening branches and Kiddie was drawing up his knees to spring out, there was a clatter of hoofs and Eye-of-the-Moon came riding forth from among the trees, mounted on Snowdrop and leading the cavalry horse by its bridle. Spotted Tail and the two warriors turned abruptly to meet him.

Kiddie heard him telling of how the pony had been taken from him at the moment of victory, when he had dismounted to secure the scalp of General Custer, of how the young half-breed scout from Birkenshaw's had escaped on her back with Buckskin Jack.

"Then this Buckskin Jack has fled?" exclaimed Spotted Tail.

"He has fled—slipped through my fingers like a bullet from the gun of the pale-face," deplored Eye-of-the-Moon.

Come!" urged Spotted Tail. And, to Kiddie's unutterable relief, all four of them turned away.

He watched them going, inwardly congratulating himself that they had discovered so little, that they had taken

nothing but the pony. But before they had passed out of hearing, he glanced across at the willow tree. The shadows of evening darkened its inner branches, but he knew where to look for the thing he had hidden in them. He raised himself on his cramped arms, trying to penetrate the gloom. Then, with a sudden gasp of dismay, he realised that Buck-skin Jack's haversack was no longer there.

It was gone—irrecoverably gone—and with it the precious Victoria Cross, the unexplored pocket-book, the watch, and all the intimate souvenirs of his dead father that he would have risked his life to save !

Without a thought of danger, he rose to his feet. Stealthily he made his way in through the bushes, going quickly in the direction which the Indians had taken. He mounted the slopes of a rising piece of ground that was bare of trees, and came into full view of the river, winding like a band of silver across an open plain that was thronged with the moving army of Redskins. About a mile away from him he could see them busily pitching their teepees for the night. Nearer to him they straggled like insects over the grass in slow procession.

Kiddie looked for the two chiefs and their attendant pair of warriors. He had overtaken them, for, while they had been following a bend of the river, he had made a short cut through the trees. He dared to creep down to the trail and wait for them, concealing himself behind a clump of cactus.

He had hardly taken ambush when he heard them coming. Eye-of-the-Moon was the first to emerge from beyond a grassy knoll, a cloud of midges hovering about his head. Then came the two warriors, Spotted Tail bringing up the rear.

It was upon Spotted Tail that Kiddie's whole attention was concentrated. The chief rode easily, with his feet free from the unfamiliar stirrups. He held the charger's bridle loosely in his left hand. He had hung his tomahawk by its loop to the pommel of the saddle, and in his right hand, half hidden under a fold of his blanket, he carried the bulging haversack by a loose end of its stout strap.

To steal swiftly, noiselessly behind him, and, with a well-measured forward leap, to snatch the haversack from his careless grasp—this would occupy barely a moment, and

then—flight with the recovered treasure into the shelter of the trees, where no horseman could follow. It seemed easy of accomplishment, and Kiddie reflected that, while he himself was young and agile, Sintagalasca was an old man, probably no longer alert of movement, and certainly wholly unprepared.

Waiting until the chief should come abreast of him, he stood ready, bracing himself for the leap. For an instant his eyes rested upon the warrior's handsome face, unsullied by war paint, unscarred by wounds, still smooth and clear of the wrinkles of age.

Gliding out from his hiding place, he bounded forward to the horse's side, and seized the dangling haversack in his two hands. Gripping it tightly, he gave it a sudden pull, but in reaching forward he had thrust his left hand through the double strap of the loose stirrup. His wrist was caught, the horse swerved, his foot slipped, and he fell, still clinging grimly, desperately to the haversack.

With a dexterous movement, the chief swung round in his seat, and, bending over, seized the entangled wrist in a grip of iron.

Even if he had loosened his hold of the haversack, Kiddie could not have released himself from that inexorable grip, and he was dragged along helpless for three or four yards, while the charger swayed and swerved and kicked.

He felt as though his arm were being wrenched out of its socket, and he could not repress a cry of pain. The cry was heard by one of the warriors, who called aloud to Eye-of-the-Moon. All three of them turned, saw the struggle going on, and at once rode back.

In the meantime Kiddie's weight had pulled Spotted Tail from his horse. Yet the chief still clung to him, while the now twisted saddle strap was an additional restraint. Seeing that escape was impossible, Kiddie struggled no longer.

"So, Sintagalasca," said Eye-of-the-Moon, "it seems you have caught a prisoner!" He glanced at Kiddie, and knew him. "You have deprived me of a scalp that I had already counted as my own."

One of the two warriors dismounted, and, taking his lariat, began to bind the rope tightly about Kiddie's body and limbs,

at the same time freeing him from the stirrup strap, which had been twisted like a tourniquet about his wrist.

"Now that this one is caught," declared Eye-of-the-Moon, as he watched, "his friend, Buckskin Jack, will surely come near, in the hope of rescuing him. He will fall into the trap that I shall set for him. He will be taken. We will tie them together to the stake. It will be great medicine."

Spotted Tail remounted the now quiet charger, and Kiddie was flung helpless in front of him, the lariat biting into his straining flesh. The pain was terrible, but he made no sound. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of a brave soldier's scalp that dangled in front of them, and did not open them again until he found himself lying upon the grass, surrounded by savages, in the midst of a village of towering wigwams.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RUSE OF SPOTTED TAIL

LYING on his back with the lasso of plaited horse hair bound tightly about his limbs, Kiddie could do no more than move his head from side to side.

To the pains in his flesh were added the pangs of hunger and thirst, and the haunting certainty that a fearful torturing death awaited him. In his uttermost despair he envied the brave men who had received quick death by the bullet. He wished that he, too, might have died with Custer and Buck. Now and again a Redskin, passing near, looked down at him with glittering eyes that seemed to anticipate the savage joy of torturing him at the stake. From the wigwam, in front of which he was lying helpless in his misery, a young Indian girl tripped out. She went to a tub that had newly been filled with water, and stood slowly drinking from a dipper as she bent her large, dark eyes upon him.

Kiddie tried to move, but a hard knot in his bonds pressed against the wound in his back, and he moaned. The girl approached him, looked at him with compassion, and, bending down, put the dipper to his parched lips, letting him drink. He thanked her, speaking in the Sioux tongue. She smiled. Then she went back into the wigwam. Presently, however, she came out again, bringing with her a tall Indian, wearing the head-dress of a chief.

Kiddie looked up as the chief drew nearer to him, and saw that the girl's father was his captor, Sintagalasca.

The chief stooped and adroitly loosened the cords about his victim's legs and arms.

Kiddie struggled painfully to his feet and followed Spotted Tail into his lodge.

It was a very large tent, lighted by a clear fire of resinous

pine wood. The grassy floor was spread with buffalo robes and bear skins. At one side there was a great pile of soldiers' coats and accoutrements, and among these Kiddie noticed an open haversack, from which had been spilled some biscuits and a wedge of cheese. Spotted Tail saw his eyes resting hungrily upon this food, and he turned to his daughter.

"Thou mayest give him his last meal, Rosebud," he said.

While Kiddie ate the food, the chief sat on one of the buffalo robes in front of the fire, staring in silence into the flames. Rosebud sat near him, sorting glass beads according to their colours. At her feet lay Buckskin Jack's haversack, still unopened.

After a long time of silence, Spotted Tail looked up at Kiddie.

"The tongue of the paleface is not crooked," he began. "It is not forked. My prisoner is a paleface, and he will speak the truth."

"He will speak the truth," responded Kiddie, "or he will not open his lips."

"It is well," nodded the chief.

He plied Kiddie with many questions concerning the movements of the various generals, the strength of their arms, the extent of their knowledge of Sitting Bull's forces. But Kiddie was dumb.

"Ugh!" grunted Spotted Tail. "But the scout has eyes to see, even if his tongue is silent. He has seen many things. He has counted our ponies and our wigwams. He knows the number of our warriors. It is well that he should not go back to his paleface brothers. Eye-of-the-Moon shall have his scalp, and our squaws and children shall stand by and watch and listen when the flames caress him. I have spoken."

As he ceased he put out his foot, and pushed the haversack towards his daughter. With nimble fingers, she unbuckled the strap. Spotted Tail bent over and drew forth Buck's revolver, saw that it was empty of cartridges, and laid it aside. He showed no interest in Buck's pocket-book. Even the leather of which it was made was too small and ragged to be of use. He threw it from him with contempt. It fell within

a few inches of where Kiddie was standing, and Kiddie waited for an opportunity to get his foot upon it and draw it to him.

That opportunity came almost instantly, when, with a cry of girlish delight, Rosebud held up a chain of beads that she had taken from the bottom of the haversack. She caught at the little bronze cross that hung from it, and held it to the light in the palm of her hand. Spotted Tail watched her in silence.

Then it was that Kiddie bent down and seized the pocket-book, and thrust it into the breast of his shirt.

The chief had not seen him move. Sintagalasca's eyes were at the time bent curiously, eagerly upon the Victoria Cross, which his daughter held in her hand. He now took hold of it, turning it over in his palm with evident recognition, breathing deeply, agitatedly.

"It is the same!" he muttered. Then he turned to Kiddie. "How came this here?" he questioned. "Speak!"

Kiddie went nearer to him.

"It is great medicine," he said. "It was worn by Buckskin Jack, who has now gone to the Land of his Fathers. It was given to him by the great white queen in the fatherland of the paleface. She gave it to him because he was brave—because he was a great warrior and did mighty deeds. That was many winters ago."

Spotted Tail lapsed into silence. He sat staring dreamily into the fire. Now and then he would raise his eyes and look across at Kiddie. He took up his pipe and lighted it, smoking meditatively. Suddenly he rested his hand upon the buffalo robe beside him, and, glancing again at Kiddie, said :

"Be seated beside me. Sintagalasca would have a big talk with the young paleface. He would speak to him as to a friend."

Kiddie obeyed wonderingly.

"Whose son is my young friend?" inquired the chief, sending forth a long jet of smoke.

"He is the son of Buckskin Jack," answered Kiddie, "and his name is Little Cayuse."

"Little Cayuse?" The chief started, caught at Kiddie's

shoulder, and stared long and searchingly into his face. "Little Cayuse?" he repeated. "But that is not the name of a paleface."

"My mother was an Indian," said Kiddie, "the daughter of a great chief. Little do I know of her. Her name was Pine Leaf."

Something like a moan of pain broke from the old Indian's lips. He caught at Kiddie's right hand, clasped it in his own, pressed it to his forehead.

"Many winters have I waited for this moment," he cried. "Many winters have I waited to learn the truth. Speak, Little Cayuse! Tell me of her. Tell me of my daughter who is lost. Tell me where I may find her, my Pine Leaf."

And then, as well as he could in a language that had been other than his own since his childhood, Kiddie told all that he knew of his mother and father, all that he had discovered of the raid on Buck's ranch, and of his own life with Gideon Birkenshaw, to this same time when, by a strange turn of circumstance, he had become a captive among the Redskins in the shadow of an awful death.

Spotted Tail and Rosebud listened to him in silence, neither interrupting his narrative, but always, when Kiddie spoke of Eye-of-the-Moon, the chief would growl deep down in his throat, and his hands would close tightly upon a fold of his blanket, as if he would tear it.

"And now," Kiddie concluded, "Little Cayuse, the son of Pine Leaf, is ready. He is a prisoner, a captured scout. There is no escape for him. But he has done his duty. He will go to his death like a brave, for he is not a woman. He will not flinch."

He rose to his feet. Sintagalasca rose also, and took up the lariat, which he slowly wound into a coil about his arm. He stood in front of Kiddie, as if he were about to bind his limbs anew; but, instead of the lariat, it was the gold and beaded chain of the Victoria Cross that he put about Kiddie's neck. Holding the bronze cross in his fingers, he said:

"Well has my Little Cayuse said that this is big medicine, for it has saved his life. It has turned Sintagalasca into a man

of peace. Never again will Sintagalasca raise his hand against the white man. Little Cayuse shall take his place. He will be a great chief. He will own many ponies, many buffalo robes ; and the Sioux will bow down before him. His right arm will be so strong that no one will dare to make war against him. There will be peace in the land. I have said."

Rosebud had moved to the entrance of the lodge, and closed the flap to shut out the noise that the Indians were making in preparing for the scalp dance. But now, even as Sintagalasca ceased speaking, the flap was drawn aside, and Eye-of-the-Moon stood in the opening, his tall figure and feathered head-dress looming dark and menacing against the light of a great fire.

"How!" said Eye-of-the-Moon, in neighbourly greeting.

"How!" returned Spotted Tail. And a look of fierce and terrible hatred darted like a lightning flash from his eyes.

"Eye-of-the-Moon has come for the promised scalp of the paleface scout," said his visitor. And, drawing his scalping knife, he lurched towards Kiddie.

"Wait!" interposed Sintagalasca, in a commanding voice, as he stood between them at his full majestic height. "Not here. Not now. No blood may be shed in the wigwam of a counsellor of the nations. Wait." He folded his arms across his chest. Kiddie thought that he had never before seen so noble a figure. "Sintagalasca has spoken with his prisoner," the chief went on. "He has heard many things that have made him think, many secrets that would be strange to the ears of Eye-of-the-Moon. His prisoner must live. Great ill would befall the Sioux if he were to lose his scalp. He is big medicine. Misfortune worse than death would come upon anyone who should so much as harm a hair of his head. Much better would it be for Eye-of-the-Moon to go out to seek the scalp of his enemy, Buckskin Jack."

Eye-of-the-Moon put away his knife.

"Buckskin Jack is cunning as the fox," he complained. "He is not to be found."

"But there is one who knows his hiding-place," pursued Sintagalasca, and he glanced in Kiddie's direction.

Kiddie gave a quick start of consternation. Had he been

too free in his confidences with the chief, who had volunteered to protect him? Was Sintagalasca about to betray him?

Spotted Tail drew Eye-of-the-Moon aside. They spoke together in whispers.

In the meantime Rosebud had put Kiddie's possessions back into the haversack, which she now restored to him, strapping it over his shoulders and covering it with a blanket.

The two chiefs came up to him then.

"You will guide us to the place where Buckskin Jack is to be found," commanded Eye-of-the-Moon. "Come!"

Sintagalasca signed to Kiddie to obey. Kiddie followed the two Indians into the open air.

The wide lane between the long rows of wigwams was lighted by many camp fires. The lane was thronged with painted savages, many of them wearing fearful-looking masks. He heard the beating of drums, the monotonous chanting of the scalp dancers, the woeful wailing of mourning squaws.

Look where he would, his eyes encountered the moving shapes of Indians. They were around him like an impenetrable wall. Even if Eye-of-the-Moon had not been at his side, suspiciously watching him, he could not have dreamed of escape.

The two chiefs stood still in the flickering light of the fires. Kiddie wondered what was about to happen. But he was not kept long in suspense. Presently he saw three braves approaching, each leading an Indian pony. The first of these was Sn wdrop. Eye-of-the-Moon mounted her, seizing the halter of the second, an old, broken-kneed mustang, which Kiddie himself was told to mount.

His limbs still pained him, but an Indian boy helped him to get astride, while a brave, ordered by Eye-of-the-Moon, tied his feet together under the pony's belly, so that he should not escape. Eye-of-the-Moon then tugged at the halter, and led the way, Sintagalasca riding behind.

The procession of three filed through a long avenue of lodges. No word was spoken. The village ended abruptly at the bank of the river, where the wide trail of the Indians was clearly visible in the moonlight. Mounted scouts were picketed round

the encampment as a precaution against a surprise. The two chiefs passed through the cordon unchallenged.

"Buckskin Jack is wounded," said Eye-of-the-Moon, breaking the long silence. "He cannot move away from the place where he has been hidden."

"That is true," returned Sintagalasca.

He was riding at Kiddie's side, and now, leaning over, he thrust a revolver into Kiddie's hand.

"It is ready," he said. By which Kiddie understood that the weapon was loaded. He wondered what he was expected to do with it. Did Sintagalasca expect him to fire it at Eye-of-the-Moon? He put the gun away in his belt, and watched Sintagalasca ride forward.

They were now crossing a wide stretch of open ground, a mile or so away from the Indian encampment. The two chiefs rode together. Kiddie's pony ambled behind them with muzzle outstretched to the taut halter, held by Eye-of-the-Moon.

Sintagalasca spoke in a tone of suppressed anger.

"Long time have I known that Eye-of-the-Moon had a crooked tongue," he began, accusingly, "but not until to-night did I know the evil that is hidden in his heart. He is a fox; he is less than a woman. He is not worthy to wear the warbonnet of a chief of the Sioux. He shall wear it no longer."

"And who will take it from me?" demanded Eye-of-the-Moon, drawing to a halt.

"His accuser," retorted Sintagalasca, halting also, and facing him. And then, raising his voice, he charged Eye-of-the-Moon with having taken the life of his favourite daughter, Pine Leaf. To this he added charges of many other crimes so black and treacherous that Kiddie shuddered at the fiendish cruelty which they revealed. "These things has he done," cried Sintagalasca. "And the Great Spirit who looks down into the hearts of men knows that what I say is true."

Suddenly, Eye-of-the-Moon wheeled round. His tomahawk flashed in the moonlight; but Sintagalasca avoided the fearful blow that was aimed at his head. The two of them closed, and for many minutes there was a terrible duel between them. Eye-of-the-Moon flung away the halter of Kiddie's pony.

Snowdrop curvetted round, charged, withdrew, and charged again, and each time, when the chiefs met, their weapons clashed.

First it was their tomahawks that they used, and then their knives. They gripped each other, writhing and struggling like a pair of infuriated wolves. As they gripped, their ponies drew asunder, and the combatants fell between them, continuing the struggle on the ground. There was a momentary pause as one of them seized the other by the throat.

Then the silence was broken by a pistol shot. They separated, scrambling to their feet. They drew apart, and Kiddie saw that each held a revolver. There was a double flash. One of them fell, and the other rushed upon him. The struggle was renewed; but presently one stood up, viciously tearing a war-bonnet to shreds, and scattering the feathers in the wind.

It was Sintagalasca.

Leaving his dead opponent lying in the moonlight, he went to Snowdrop, caught her halter, and led her slowly towards Kiddie. Without a word, but breathing deeply, he cut the bonds that held Kiddie's feet, and pointed to the white pony. Kiddie dismounted and stood facing the chief.

"Sintagalasca has taken his vengeance," murmured the Indian. "His work is done. He has fought his last fight, and Little Cayuse is free. Let him decide his own destiny."

He glanced at the two war ponies. His own was a brown mustang. The waiting animals seemed to represent the two opposing races, white and red, between which Kiddie was to choose. Kiddie did not hesitate. He strode towards Snowdrop.

"Let it be as my son has chosen," said the chief sadly. "Let him depart into the land of the white man, and may the Great Spirit who holds all men in the hollow of his hand, guide and protect him always. Farewell, Little Cayuse." He pointed westward. "That is your direction. Mine lies backward to my people. Farewell. I have spoken."

They both mounted, and Kiddie rode away. When he reached the lower ground of the trail beside the river, he halted and looked back. Sintagalasca had not moved. The

moon shone on his white head-dress, on his crimson cloak. The glow of the Indian camp fires was behind him. Seated on his horse, motionless as a marble figure, and with his right hand upraised, he seemed to be an embodiment of all the generations of the Red Man stretching back into the beginning of time.

CHAPTER XXVI

LORD ST. OLAVE

“Yes, those are the Rattlesnake Mountains. And do you see those tall pine trees, like the ones behind the Spaniards on Hampstead Heath, and that big field of maize? Well, that’s Birkenshaw’s. You ought to see the camp itself presently. Yes, there it is, beyond the green meadow, where all those cattle are grazing! The big house in the middle is Gideon’s, and the one to the right is Abe Harum’s. The paddock—I mean the corral—where the ponies are kept, is behind.”

Geoff Severn and Harold Fritton were riding together along the trail in advance of the prairie schooner which had been their travelling home since they had left the railway train east of the Blue River. With their wide slouch hats, blue shirts, and red neckerchiefs, they looked like men of the plains rather than a pair of English boys. They had bought their clothes in Leavenworth, Geoff having suggested the wearing of them as an appropriate compliment to their prospective hosts at the camp.

“I really think we ought to have written to Mr. Birkenshaw to let him know we are coming,” said Fritton. “Surprise visits are usually a bit of a fraud, and people like to be prepared.”

“That’s the very reason I didn’t want to write,” objected Severn. “I like to come upon these simple, honest people just as they are, don’t you know. If we’d warned Gideon Birkenshaw, the odds are that he would have dressed up to the occasion, and come out to meet us in a superannuated top-hat and a badly fitting frock-coat, his face shining with soap, and his hair oiled, instead of appearing in his regulation picturesque costume of the plains.”

"I wasn't thinking of his side of the question," resumed Fritton. "I was thinking of our own. We haven't come out here to study the picturesque, but to find my uncle, and, if we're to get help at Birkenshaw's, we ought to have made sure that your friend would be at home. He may have gone away on a holiday, you know, or to see some relatives or other hundreds of miles away from here."

"I don't suppose that Gideon Birkenshaw has ever taken a holiday in all his life," said Geoff. "And as for relatives, it's on the cards that he hasn't any. The chap Kiddie that I've told you of so often is only his adopted son, I believe. No, we shall find Gideon at home, I haven't a doubt. Why, there's the very man, riding the same ragged old horse that he used to ride!"

This last exclamation was caused by his catching sight of a figure which had suddenly appeared on the top of a rise in the trail.

Gideon was mounted on his favourite sorrel mare, and was driving about a dozen other ponies, which he had been rounding up on the grass land. He had heard the loud crack of the waggon-master's whip, and now, as he topped the height, he paused, looking backward, with his eyes shaded under his wide-brimmed hat.

Allowing his loose ponies to loiter where they might, he rode back at a walking pace.

"How d'you do, Mr. Birkenshaw?" Geoff called out as they drew near.

"Pretty well, thank you, stranger," Gideon answered casually. "Goin' westward, are you? Guess that's your outfit I see comin' along with the foreign-lookin' flag a-flyin' from it? 'Tain't the old Stars and Stripes, though the colours be the same. I've got a kind of notion it's British."

He was looking at Harold Fritton as he spoke, rather than at Geoff Severn. But Geoff drew his attention by saying :

"Your crops are ripening nicely, Gideon. All well at the camp, I hope—Abe, and Tom, and Kiddie, and You-You—I mean Mee-Mee?"

Gideon recognised him then.

"Scat my cats!" he exclaimed. "I'm just a Dutchman if it ain't young Master Severn that was here last fall! Well, I'm surprised. Say, you're payin' a considerable compliment to the State of Wyoming, and the county of Sweetwater, to come back, and I'm real glad to see you. Guess you'll excuse my workin' clothes, seein' I didn't expect you. I'll just trot along home and fix things up for your reception. Yes, we're all well, so far's I can say. I ain't just certain of Kiddie, seein' he only came home middle of the night, and has been sleepin' like a Illinois hog ever since, and ain't chirped a word."

"Has he been away on a holiday, then?" asked Geoff.

Gideon's face took on an expression of extreme gravity.

"Holiday?" he repeated. "Ain't you heard? Ain't you been a-readin' of the news sheets?"

Geoff shook his head and smiled.

"I'm afraid we don't greatly appreciate the American Press," he answered. "Why? What has Kiddie been up to?"

"Well," returned Gideon. "I just figure he's been up to 'bout the biggest thing that's happened in the State of Wyoming since I can remember. Say, you ain't heard of the Custer massacre, then? That's strange. I reckoned the very birds of the air had heard of it."

"Oh, yes, of course, we've heard of that," rejoined Geoff. "We've heard of nothing else all along the road. But what has that got to do with your Kiddie?"

"Heaps," returned Gideon. "He was right in it. Saw the whole thing, and was the only one of the whole bunch to come out of it alive to tell the tale. It was great, and you may guess I'm a whole lot eager to get home and hear what he's got to say. If you'll excuse me, I'll quit right now and get along."

They watched him as he rode off to gather his errant ponies. With call of voice and crack of whip he quickly rounded them up and got them well in hand, driving them forward in a cloud of dust.

Kiddie was awakened from a long and refreshing sleep by the sound of talking in the adjoining room. He dis-

tinguished the voices of Gideon, Abe Harum, and Isa Blagg ; but there were two other voices which he did not recognise. Clear, refined voices they were, quite unlike any that he was familiar with, although one of them reminded him of the voice of young Geoffrey Severn, who had been here and gone back to England months ago. Surely it could not be Geoff Severn ! And yet, as it came to him again, he caught an intonation, a phrase, a laugh that could hardly be doubted. As he dressed he listened, and presently he was sure.

“ Ah, and here’s Mee-Mee, too,” cried Geoff. “ How do, Mrs. Carter ? I hope you are well.”

“ Guess I’se plenty very well, thank you all the same,” answered the Pawnee girl. “ Ain’t your fader come along wi’ you ? ”

“ Not this time,” said Geoff. “ He was afraid you would keep him altogether if he came out again. Have you got any of those nice doughnuts you used to make ? ”

When Kiddie entered the room all eyes were turned upon him. He looked strikingly handsome, and was dressed with unusual care. Gideon did not fail instantly to notice that, instead of the customary red scarf and blue shirt, he now wore a black silk necktie, caught in a sailor knot under the collar of a white flannel shirt. In place of the frontiersman’s leather belt, bristling with knife and pistol, he had tied a black and white handkerchief. The only point of colour about his clothing was part of a fine, elaborately wrought chain of beads looped from a buttonhole to his breast pocket.

“ Say, you ain’t in black for anyone, eh ? ” questioned Gideon. Then he quickly added, “ Ah, yes, Gen’ral Custer.”

Kiddie seemed to have acquired a new dignity, as, disregarding Gideon’s remark, he walked across to where Geoff Severn and his companion were sitting, near the open window. He held out his hand.

“ How do you do, Severn ? ” he said. “ I am glad—very glad—to see you.”

For an instant Geoff did not remember him, and it was only mechanically that he took the proffered hand. Then, recollecting, he exclaimed, with a schoolboy laugh :

“ Kiddie ! I say, how you’ve altered—improved ! I

hardly knew you for the same fellow that fished me out of Grizzly Notch ! ”

“ That reminds me,” nodded Kiddie, “ I have to thank you for the books you left for me. I’ve read them all, and with considerable advantage. The Shakespeare’s going to be a favourite book all my life, I guess.” He stood back a step, fixing his eyes curiously upon Geoff’s companion, who returned the look with equal curiosity.

Geoff had not thought an introduction necessary, and he was rather surprised that one should seem to be expected on Kiddie’s part.

“ This is my friend, Harold Fritton,” he said, and left the two together to cross to the table to remove his hat, which he had left there.

Kiddie gave a quick little start on hearing that name, but his sudden agitation was not visible in his face. Outwardly, he was calm as he extended his hand in greeting.

“ I’m proud to meet you,” he said. “ Proud and glad. There’s no one I’d rather have met. It’s strange, your coming here just at this time, when I wanted you most. I’ve been thinkin’ of you a lot the past few days.”

“ Indeed ? ” Harold Fritton stood up in front of him, regarding him wonderingly. “ I should have thought you were not even aware of my existence.”

Kiddie slowly released the hand that he had held in his firm grasp.

“ Guess I know all about you,” he returned. “ And I’ve a notion I know pretty well what you’ve come out here for. ‘Tain’t just a simple matter to straighten out; but it’s a whole lot easier now than when Mr. Severn was here, and I calculate you and I can settle it all between us. But not at this minute. Old Man Gideon there’s hankering to hear all about what I’ve seen and done since I’ve been from home, and I must go and talk to him right now.”

Gideon, indeed, was already betraying his impatience. He had risen from his chair, and stood by the table, nervously tapping it with the tips of his gnarled fingers, while his eyes were fixed upon Kiddie.

It was Isa Blagg, however, who brought Kiddie to the point.

"I allow you've been keepin' up to your reputation, Kiddie," he called out across the room. "I've allus said that when thar's anythin' happenin' you're right there. Guess you'd 'bout the narrowest squeak you ever had, in that Custer business."

"Guess I had, sheriff," said Kiddie. "But you see, there wasn't a chance for us from the very beginnin'. I reckon there was a full five thousand of them to deal with, and we were corralled. And when Custer fell there wasn't a cartridge left."

"Guess you haven't wasted any of them yourself, Kiddie," remarked Gideon. "You didn't give your own gun a whole lot of rest. I'd like to know how many Injuns you accounted for."

"I can tell you," said Kiddie. "Not one. I never fired a shot. Until just near the end, when General Custer and— and another—stood up alone, there was 'most as much as ~~I~~ could do to attend to the boys that needed a helpin' hand, and to search among them for a last drop of water, or a forgotten cartridge."

He added some harrowing details of the fight, and of his work among the wounded.

"But after all," he concluded, "I didn't see a whole lot, and I guess I've told 'most everything I know to the men that wrote about it in the newspapers."

"And they report," said Gideon, "that the last man alive was General Custer himself—that, barring yourself, who appear to have got out of it by a miracle, there wasn't a one of them all that escaped!"

"Well," resumed Kiddie, "General Custer certainly fired the last shot, but he wasn't the last man left alive. There were many among the wounded that lived after him, until the Indians went back, and there was another besides myself who came out of it along with me, and so escaped the horrid scalping knives."

Kiddie began to falter in his speech, and his fingers were nervously twitching at the end of the bead chain that was in his pocket. His eyes were moist as he added:

"I shall always be thankful that I was able to bury him

decently. And some day—soon—I guess we can give him a proper grave."

"Say, Kiddie," interposed Abe Harum, wiping a drop of wet from his hand, where it had fallen; for he sat close to where Kiddie was standing.

"Say, Kiddie, you're a-cryin', sure. Who was the man that you carried out of it? I'll go bail it was you that tried to save him. Who was he? Did you know him?"

Kiddie cleared his throat.

"He was the man who stood back to back with the general right to the end," he explained. "You all knew him—the bravest, truest man along the trail. You knew him as Buckskin Jack. But that wasn't his real name. His real name was Reginald Fritton, Earl of St. Olave."

"Ah, you might have guessed it was Buck," declared Isa Blagg.

Harold Fritton had started forward excitedly. He caught at Kiddie's arm.

"What's that you say?" he cried. "Reginald Fritton? Buckskin Jack was Reginald Fritton—my uncle?"

"Yes," Kiddie answered, after a moment's pause. "Your uncle, and—my father."

If Kiddie had fired off his pistol in the room he could not have caused greater astonishment than was caused by this unexpected announcement.

It affected his hearers in different ways. Abe Harum was simply astonished at Kiddie's declaration that he was the son of Buckskin Jack. Gideon Birkenshaw and the sheriff were astonished at the same fact, but had the additional surprise of learning that Buck was the long-sought-for Earl of St. Olave, and that Kiddie was his heir; while the astonishment of Harold Fritton and Geoff Severn was centred upon the circumstances that their quest had suddenly come to an end in a revelation which was foreign to all their expectations.

To his honour it must be said that not for a moment did Harold Fritton betray disappointment in the discovery that he himself had no longer a claim to the title and fortune, which he now, without question or seeking for proof, believed to belong to Kiddie. He was amazed, but not annoyed, and

his amazement was due to his inability to place the surprising facts in their proper sequence, and in their true light.

But afterwards, when he and Geoff Severn were alone with Kiddie and Gideon Birkenshaw, the whole story was made clear.

"The one thing that most gives me satisfaction," said Kiddie, "is finding out that I ain't a mere nameless waif of the plains, but the son of an English gentleman and brave soldier. In one of the books that you gave me," he went on, turning to Geoff Severn, "I have read about the Victoria Cross and all that it means. Here is the medal that was presented to my father by his Sovereign for his valour in savin' the life of Rube Carter on the field of battle. He was a brave man, and I'm proud to be his son."

"Yes," said Harold Fritton, taking the little bronze cross, which Kiddie handed to him, "you jolly well may be, as I am proud that he was my uncle." He examined the medal attentively. "Did he wear this at the last—in the Custer fight?" he inquired.

Kiddie nodded. "He wore it under his shirt, and gave it to me when he was dyin'; told me to keep it for his sake."

"I hope you will," said Harold, "though of course you're not entitled to wear it."

"I guess Kiddie deserves to wear it, if it's only valour that counts," said Gideon Birkenshaw.

"He may win one for himself one day, if he enters the British Army," suggested Geoff Severn. "Rather curious to think that this one was worn for over a dozen years by an Indian chief. Do you know how old Eye-of-the-Moon got hold of it, Kiddie?"

Kiddie shook his head.

"I only know that it was round my neck when Eye-of-the-Moon brought me one stormy night to Gideon's dug-out in Colorado," he said.

"Ah!" smiled Geoff, who had inherited some of his father's legal acumen. "That's just the point that we wanted cleared up. We know that Captain Fritton had a little son named Harry; but, according to Rube Carter's letter, which you shall presently see, little Harry was supposed to have been

killed by the Indians. If Mr. Birkenshaw can prove that you are little Harry, then I think the chain of evidence will be complete."

"I just guess I can do that in two twos," declared Gideon.

"But," added Kiddie, "if it comes to a matter of proof, you've not yet got anything more than my word for it that Buckskin Jack and Captain Reginald Fritton were one and the same. I calculate the papers I found in his pocket-book will be needed. I've got them here." He produced a worn leather pocket-book and opened it. "A paragraph from a newspaper about Queen Victoria pinning the V.C. on his breast; a certificate of his marriage with my mother, signed by the sheriff of Cheyenne and witnessed by Rube Carter; a certificate of my birth and baptism; a photograph of his mother, and a letter from her written to him in India. I reckon he carried them about with him always, wrapped in waterproof cloth."

Kiddie took out each article in turn and handed it to his cousin, who examined them with peculiar interest, passing them presently to Geoff Severn.

"This portrait of my grandmother is just the same as one we have at home," said Harold Fritton. "And her letter, too. I've seen her beautiful writing before. What a dear old lady she was!"

Gideon Birkenshaw had taken up the marriage certificate, which Fritton had not yet examined.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Why, this is signed by Old Man Davidson, that's still district registrar for Cheyenne! And it's got all three of Buck's names on it—Fritton, Arbuthnot, and Buckskin Jack. Say, if one of you'd only gone to Davidson long ago, I figure he could have saved you heaps of useless searchin' for that missing heir!"

"I wonder why Uncle Reginald carried on this singular masquerade?" mused Harold Fritton. He turned to Geoff Severn. "Didn't you tell me, Geoff, that, when you saw him here in his character of Buckskin Jack, you questioned him about the missing Captain Fritton?"

"Oh, Buck knew perfectly well that my father and I were here searching for him," returned Geoff. "Why he kept

himself dark when he heard that he was heir to a title and a fortune is a profound mystery to me."

Kiddie had not yet closed the pocket-book, and now he drew from it another document.

"I guess this letter will explain," he said. "It's a letter that my father seems to have written only a few days before he went out scoutin' for General Custer. It's addressed to Mr. Severn. We might as well have it read aloud."

He passed the letter to Geoff, who read as follows :

"DEAR SIR,

"As I am about to go forth upon what I fear may prove a dangerous expedition among the Indians, I desire to write to you on certain legal matters concerning myself and my family, in which you are interested, and in connection with which you came over to the United States some few months ago.

"When I had the pleasure of meeting you and your son in my capacity of friendly guide to your outfit, travelling west across the wilds of Wyoming, I gathered that you were searching for one Reginald Fritton, or for legal proof of his death. For reasons of my own, I did not reveal myself to you, and I took an early opportunity of disappearing. I did not wish to be known as Reginald Fritton, and an English earldom and the fortune attached to it have not the attractions for me that they might once have had, before I had spoiled my life and become the desperado that I now am. I own that it was hard for me to resist the temptation of telling you to look for your missing English officer in Buckskin Jack ; and, had my son been spared to me, I should certainly, for his sake, have acknowledged my identity. But my dear wife and child were taken from me, victims of Indian cruelty, and I am devoting the remainder of my life, so far as I may, to protecting the homes of the dwellers on these plains from the anguish which Redskin barbarity inflicted on mine.

"But it has occurred to me, since I met you, that, while I leave you in doubt concerning your wandering heir, I may be causing legal complications by standing in the way of someone who is probably far more worthy than I am to enjoy

the inheritance. I understand—I heard from your son—that I have a nephew, lately at Eton, and now at Oxford, an awfully nice chap, and a ripping bowler, presumably a fit and proper person to take his seat in the House of Lords. Let him take it now, with the full assurance that it is his by right.

“ If I survive my present journey, I shall probably destroy this letter. If I do not, it may chance to be found on my dead body, together with other documents, which may be of use to you in determining my identity, and giving legal proof of my death.

“ I am, dear sir,

“ Yours very truly,

“ REGINALD FRITTON, V.C., *alias BUCKSKIN JACK.*”

“ I allus guessed that Buck had a more’n ordinary feelin’ agin red Injuns,” remarked Gideon Birkenshaw, as Geoff folded up the letter. “ And, so far as his intention went, he lived up to it. I reckon there’s many and many a family now livin’ happily in this here State that owe their preservation from massacre to Buckskin Jack. As for your legal proof business and all that, there ain’t no good in argifyng any more. Buck was Captain Fritton, Captain Fritton was the Earl of St. Olave. Kiddie’s his lawful son beyond a doubt, and I guess Kiddie’s goin’ to find that seat in the House of Lords a whole lot more comfortable than the saddle of a prairie pony.”

“ Shall you come back to England with us, Cousin Harry ? ” asked Harold Fritton.

Kiddie glanced at Gideon.

“ Yes,” he answered, “ if Gideon will come too. You may as well, old man. Abe Harum can have the ranch, and marry Mee-Mee, and be happy. And you—well, I’ll look after you.”

“ Makin’ me your coachman, to drive you ‘bout the streets of London ? ” said Gideon. “ I’d serve you faithful, Kiddie ; you know that.”

“ Serve me ? ” echoed Kiddie. “ You shall never serve me, Gid. You shall be my friend, my foster-father, as you’ve always been. I guess I shouldn’t be happy without you.

It'll be kind of home-like to have you there, and, when I ain't sittin' in the House of Lords, or anythin' of that sort, we'll sit together in the verandah, same as we've done here, and talk about the ponies, and cattle, and Injuns, and—and Buck."

Gideon drew a deep breath.

"If you figure it'd make you happy to have me along o' you, Kiddie," he said, "then I guess I'll come."

Geoff Severn then handed the package of documents back to Kiddie.

"Now that we have found you so much sooner than we expected, Lord St. Olave," he said, "might I suggest that we go to England by way of San Francisco?"

Kiddie thought for a moment.

"That's not a bad idea of yours, Severn," he said. "I have always wanted to see more of the world than can be seen from our front door here. We should see the Pacific Ocean and Japan, and perhaps India, as well as a good deal of Europe; and association with my cousin Harold and you would improve my English, and take off some of the rough corners, and—you see, I need a heap of polishin' up."

"I think it is just the rough corners that I like about you, Cousin Harry," smiled Harold, "and, as for your English—well, I'm sure it's quite as good as the slang we learn at Eton."

"If you ask me," added Gideon, "'tain't allus his way of speakin' that makes a gentleman. A gentleman's one that's allus ready to do a good turn to other people, that leads a clean, sober, hon'able life, and can look the hull world in the face and say he never done anythin' he was ashamed of. And I just reckon Kiddie's that. And I say it that have known him since the time when the name of Kiddie was a heap more appropriate than it is now. But, polish him as you like, make him an English gentleman, if you will, to me he'll allus be Kiddie—Kiddie of Birkenshaw's—Kiddie of the Camp."

THE END.

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